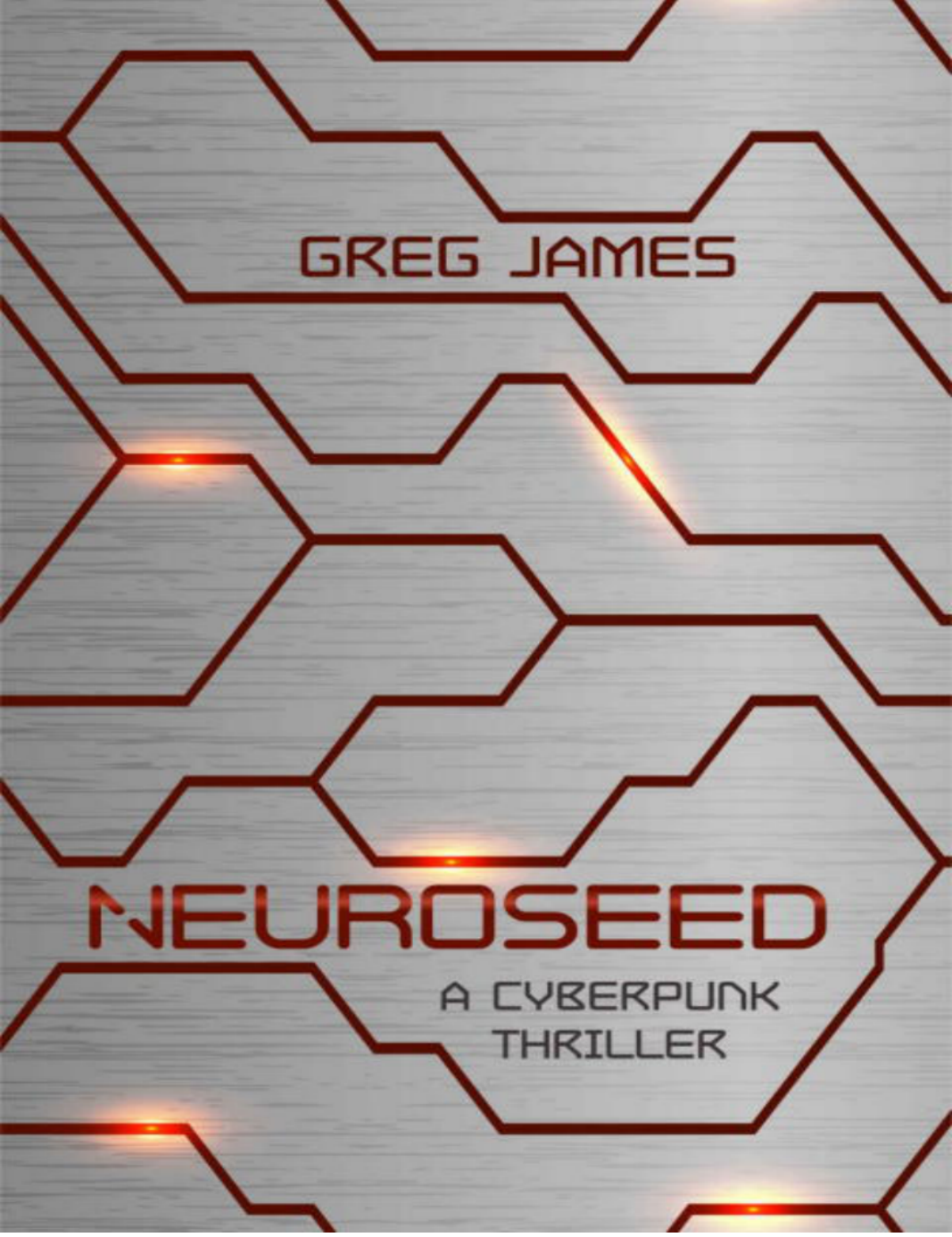
GREG JAMES
NEUROSEED
A CYBERPUNK
THRILLER

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Annotation

A Dystopian Cyberpunk Adventure for fans of Blade Runner, Altered Carbon and Neuromancer! Celeste Walker's home is the Crawl: a dystopian mega-city covering two-thirds of the Earth's surface. The entire population are interconnected through a cyberspace network called the Flood. Celeste hunts down and defuses rogue memories in the Flood for a living. Her life is well-ordered, calculated, and routine – until the memories she hunts start fighting back. What is real and what is not begins to blur. Her work colleagues are found dead – is she the murderer? With her life and sanity at stake, Celeste finds her way to the forbidden Zero Sector, where the shocking truth awaits. Will she be the one to lead a revolution against the hi-sector elite and the mysterious Man in the Moon? Or, will she betray and ultimately destroy the human race? Includes bonus short stories: Neon Dawn, A Sculptor's Dream and End Program

"To call Neuroseed a roller-coaster wouldn't do it justice, it's more like an acid-trip on an alien dimension."Autumn Christian, acclaimed author of The Crooked God Machine and We are Wormwood "One of the bleakest things I've ever read."The Booze and Books Review Blog

- Greg James
  - Chapter One
  - Chapter Two
  - Chapter Three
  - Chapter Four
  - Chapter Five
  - Chapter Six
  - Chapter Seven
  - Chapter Eight
  - Chapter Nine
  - Chapter Ten
  - Chapter Eleven
  - Chapter Twelve
  - Chapter Thirteen
  - Chapter Fourteen
  - Chapter Fifteen
  - Chapter Sixteen
  - Chapter Seventeen
  - Chapter Eighteen
  - Chapter Nineteen
  - Chapter Twenty
  - Chapter Twenty-One

- Chapter Twenty-Two
- Chapter Twenty-Three
- Chapter Twenty-Four
- Chapter Twenty-Five
- Chapter Twenty-Six
- Bonus Content: Tales from the Crawl
  - Neon Dawn
  - A Sculptor's Dream
  - End Program
- Praise for the Author
- Author's Note
- Acknowledgments
- About the Author
- Copyright

Greg James
NEUROSEED
A CYBERPUNK THRILLER

Julie Cassar – author, friend and fellow lover of the bourbon

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft, deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright,
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veiled the pole.

In the morning, glad I see,
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

A Poison Tree,
William Blake
(1789)

Chapter One

It is the future, and we never made it past the moon; no colonies on Mars, and no long-distance manned voyages beyond Pluto. Humanity's dreams and ambitions drowned under the accumulated industrial weight of its own refuse and shit. After the fall of everything we thought we could be, came the rise of everything we doomed ourselves to. The rich and the powerful fled to the moon, to Antara station, leaving the rest behind. However, they didn't forget about us entirely – or rather, the dollar value we could generate for them. So, they built the Crawl: a cityscape spread over two thirds of the Earth's surface, always on the move because the planet's crust is no longer stable enough to support its weight. The Earth is dead, and the Crawl mines the last trace resources buried deep within her corpse. The Crawl is a cancer, and we are its parasites, desperately trying to stay alive. We live. We sweat. We breathe in the open gutter of existence. And, sometimes, we look up at the stars, trying to remember what it felt like for our ancestors to reach out to them.

*

"Excuse me, Miss, are you all right?"

Neethan had been intrigued by the woman since she came in earlier that evening. You didn't see many people wearing real clothes these days, even in Antara Station: the last surviving moon-base. The diners sitting at the *faux*-wood tables might have looked as if they were wearing the finest black-tie evening wear, but the wealthy didn't have as much as they appeared to possess at first glance. Their fine clothes were holographs, mostly softlight. Some might be the costlier hardlight, but you had to be bigly in the sheckles to afford that, and only a few were, despite the image they projected to the Crawlers on Earth.

Underneath the holographs, the diners wore standard fibre-suits, or fibes – the same as those shipped down to the Crawl, only cleaner and newer. Women usually wore fibes tinted with lighter pastel colours, whereas the men accepted the standard dirt-brown and shit-grey variety. This woman though, she was wearing Real. How could that be possible?

Neethan had a little Real of his own. It was a small, trimmed square of genuine jean fabric in a hermetically sealed jar. He'd saved the equivalent of a month's shares to purchase it. The woman's red silk dress was long enough to sweep the floor. Part of him screamed at the sight of the hem touching the dirty surface. She was letting it get

soiled, ruined… desecrated.

How could someone be so careless? How could someone be so rich?

He'd never seen her before, despite everyone who had sheckles coming here to watch the Earthside rise each day. The more he looked her way as he did the rounds – taking orders, serving digitised drinks – the more her presence felt wrong to him, like error in a datafeed, or honesty in FakeNews.

She was beautiful: statuesque rather than slender, with platinum blonde hair that uncoiled, python-like, over her shoulder. Her eyes were cobalt neon chips, and her lips were red as real life. There was a colour and vibrancy about her that made Neethan's skin pebble with sweat. Too real to be real. Unlike the faces around him, a grey paleness came from living in the station: eyes dull and underscored with insomnia shadows, hair hanging in lank, greasy strips, skin marked by acne scars, premature lines, and malnutrition. None of these symptoms afflicted the woman at the corner table.

She's not like the rest of us – *how?*

Neethan felt the urge to ask her who she was, to tear that red dress off her and fuck her on all fours until he felt as alive as she appeared, or to run away right now and get as far away from her presence as possible.

But it was his job to take her order, and he didn't want to be zeroed and sent down to the Crawl. Running away was not an option. Unconsciously brushing his hair into place, Neethan approached the table and touched the nodule of flesh under his left ear. His soulwire would transmit the woman's order straight to one of the cook-pods.

He stood at the table for a minute, patiently waiting, before realising that although the woman was holding the menu, she wasn't reading. She was muttering something unintelligible under her breath.

"Can I take your order, please?"

Her head snapped around, and she looked up at him. No emotion was evident in her features; her face a perfect mask. The fleshy left corner of her bottom lip twitched a little.

"Excuse me, Miss…" He didn't know what else to say, other than, "Are you all right?"

Her head shook back and forth.

"I'm sorry to hear that. May I get you some refreshment to help…?"

The flesh around her eyes was coming loose, sagging off the bone like perished rubber, revealing glistening threads of musculature beneath.

Neethan froze.

The woman's mouth fell open and he saw raw emptiness inside –

a hissing, black, electric void. It spoke to him, *"The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round. The wheels on the bus go round and round, all day long."*

As the void spoke, the woman's head wagged violently from side to side in time with the rhythm of the words, as if she were a marionette with a broken neck, being jerked around by a cruel master.

"Can I help you?" the words exited his mouth slowly. They tasted mechanical, pointless, and not like him at all. It felt like someone – *something* – else was speaking through him. He didn't know the woman, and her words were superficially harmless, but he felt the need to put his hand over her mouth, to stop her from saying more.

"…round and round… round and round…"

Neethan turned his head, slowly, all too slow, to see the other diners trembling and transfixed, staring into space as if they'd been switched off internally.

This must be a nightmare. This must be a dream. I'll wake up in my module soon. I hope.

His hand was almost where it needed to be – over the woman's gaping mouth – when the void inside her spoke again. Neethan felt the truth of her words resonate in his bones.

"…the wheels on the bus go round and round, all day long…"

Neethan was no longer moving, or standing, instead he was on the floor, spasming violently. The words cut through him, scraping away his flesh and laying open the marrow of his bones. His eyes burst and ran down his face in liquid streams. Something hot and thick as glue poured from his nose: a flux of blood and liquefied brains. He couldn't scream, because his vocal cords were burnt cartilage-wires, and – before his ear drums dissolved completely – he heard his mouth moving relentlessly, miming the words of the void.

"…the wheels on the bus go round and round all day long…"

And then… nothing. Everything switched off like a dead television channel.

Chapter Two

Celeste Walker's life was not the one she wanted. It was a Monday morning, one on which the molecules felt itchy, loose and over-grey while the sub-atomic burned bright and violent on the edges of her periphery. Every morning unfolded like the same dream: wake-up, wash, dress, swallow a lukewarm nuke-pac, and catch a hub-car into the Compound.

Before dressing, Celeste looked at herself in the holo-mirror. Her face was finely-boned with a beauty spot on her chin that would've been considered a blemish and lasered away by most. Her hands and feet were small, unmodified sculptures. Her body curved in ways that were no longer on trend. Her long dark hair was interrupted by a barcode-wide stripe of mood-print that changed its shade according to hormone levels; it had degraded a few nodes over the last twenty, but she liked its distortion and the occasional hissing ripples of white noise it gave off. With more and more designer vat-born operatives dwelling in the mid-sectors, she felt increasingly different and out of place. Being human was going out of fashion. 'Difference' had become flaw and would soon be upgraded to full deviation. Would it be punishable enough to be zeroed one day?

Who could tell?

It was a reflection of how life went in the Crawl. Before the first v-borns, there were the vat-grown upgrades: bones, internal organs, and skin grafts. What began as surgical and medical became purely cosmetic: custom hearts and tobacco-resistant lungs. Still, everything degraded in the end, sometimes horrifically. The v-borns started little different from early military drones, until there were too many to deny them citizenship.

Everything was steadily replaced, redesigned and made more beautiful on the surface, only exacerbating the painful reality aching underneath – the aging, broken-down grinding existence that was the Crawl. And, through the Flood, there were so many escapes that reality no longer served a meaningful function – except to remind one of the ugliness and awfulness underpinning existence.

Celeste had decided to hold onto her own difference. In a place where beauty is a skin graft away and ecstasy always on discount, ugliness became purity and imperfection became a form of transcendence. She rubbed a thumb against an ache nestled deep inside her forehead and breathed out; remembering strange, ovular eyes, bright light, pain, being unable to move.

Leftover dream-crud. Best flush it out before it full-ruins the day. She punched a sequence into the keypad by the head of her

compression-couch. The processor sang a one-note chime and spat out a strip of perforated gloss-black squares. She snapped off one, then two, and dry-swallowed them. A couple of blacks first thing in the morn would give enough buzz to make it to the Compound. The rest of the strip went into her plastic jacket's pocket, and she tapped the cracked button that air-sealed it with a light hiss.

After wiping the night's condensation from the data-screen next to the module's airlock, she read up the latest atmos-info: nothing much to worry about. Light precipitation with low acid and median toxin levels. She unhooked a lightweight breathing mask from its hanger and strapped it on before operating the airlock.

Outside, the sky was the colour of unprocessed faeces. The blocs and strips of habitation modules were stained even darker with unappealing shades of neglect, rust, and decay. The only vivid colour in the mid-secs was cast by salvaged neon signage people fixed to the casings of their modules. Even with a mere two hundred and fifty square feet allocated per fam-unit, the urge to make a home endured. It didn't matter what the signs said: it was the light and colour people wanted. She glimpsed advertisements for *Tsingtao Beer*, *Huawei Tech, Trump Org* and *Coca-Cola.* People needed to feel they weren't stranded in hell, even when all the evidence suggested they were. A little light helped reinforce that false notion.

How many modules were there down in the lo-sectors, she wondered, all stacked on top of one another. The mid-secs were getting thin. In a generation or two, would there be anyone left up here? The hi-sectors up above the localised atmosphere belt shimmered like a hidden constellation. Each strata of the Crawl was dependent on what rested below. If the mid-secs were decimated, what would happen?

Celeste had a deep feeling nothing much would happen. The hi-secs would cut loose and move to the moon with the rest of the rich, leaving the Crawl to fall apart.

With that grim thought nestling in her mind, Celeste caressed the nodule underneath her right earlobe. The soft nub of matter hardened and her own breathing heightened, as the world around her became a momentary blur of shape and sound. Time and space resolved with a sky of airbrushed blue with scattered cloud formations. The modules remained, but their scuzz had been deleted, leaving shining chrome exteriors that burned with effervescent rainbow hues whenever the light of an unseen sun caught on them. This would be her reality today.

She was standing on the platform that ran alongside the airlocks for her strip of modules. It was, in a way, like a street from old-time – except that it was suspended in the Earth's troposphere on the back of

the Crawl.

The 8:31 hub-car pulled up to the platform, and Celeste climbed aboard. The driver greeted her with a broad smile that wasn't really there. A blink of pixellation gave her a glimpse of dirty, threadbare overalls and a face carved into ridges by sleeplessness. She could almost hear the rattle, scrape, and grind of the hub-car's chassis as it chugged off from the platform even though, in her dialled-up perception, the departure was smooth, the engines were silent, and the air-conditioning did not smell of whatever vermin had trapped itself in there, died, and slowly rotted away.

In her periphery, Celeste's reality faltered. Her fellow travellers were slumped, worn-out by the perpetual repetition and exhaustion of their lives. A few bent forwards, wracked by violent coughing fits that ended in bile and blood spattering on the floor, adding to stains that had accumulated over the decades. Their one-piece fibe-suits were varying shades of unwashed. Reality compensated – buffering hard – until the commuters appeared as svelte creations drawn from data-memes of antique beauty commercials and romantic comedies. She'd dialled things up way too high: always a risk after a bad night's sleep. There was only so much reality one could take.

I'll just have to put up with it until reset.

They were almost at the Compound when the hub-car lunged to a halt. It sent Celeste stumbling forward, scrambling her reality overlay completely. She landed roughly, swearing. When she regained her feet, the Crawl was as it was once again – red lights radiating out along the gridlines of its infrastructural web, each winking on and off in sequence, under a dismal sky.

The sonorous drone of a siren could be heard. Everyone in the hub-car, seated and standing, fell silent. A few of the older men took hats off in respect, pressing them against their hearts with wire-knuckled hands.

Someone was about to be dropped.

Celeste moved to the front of the hub-car, ignoring comments and mutters from the older commuters as she tried to peer out of the grubby windows. There it was – a module steadily separating itself from a bloc. It slid out in jerky slow motion, each pause enabling the essential pipes and cables to be detached and withdrawn. Through the small, square windows of the module cube, Celeste could see lights flickering on and off as the power inputs died. They would be re-routed and re-connected once they reached their destination, but that was no comfort. Their destination was below. The lo-secs.

A momentary flicker: a child's face pressed against dirty glass, as if frozen, or preserved. Big, dark eyes framed by electric white hair. A name came to mind, though Celeste knew no-one by that name:

Grace…

Feels like I've seen her before, somewhere, in a dream?

She sighed. Dream-crud was still clinging on despite the blacks she'd taken.

The last cable detached itself and wound back into the bloc. The module hung suspended for a moment, directly ahead of the hub-car. The vertical transit system operated off the same power-grid as the horizontal transit system. It saved time and money and allowed co-ordinators to set an example for anyone thinking about missing shifts.

The module dropped. A soundless event. The clouds covering the lower sectors of the Crawl swallowed it up. Down below, there was nowhere to go. The lo-secs lined the underside of the Crawl; they had a front-row seat to the ion storms, plasma cascades, and nuclear fires that raged across what was left of the Earth's surface. Zeroes lived out their lo-sec lives inside their modules, wired into the Flood every hour of the day and night, assaulting themselves with non-stop pseudo-pleasure and hi-doses. Their bodily functions were catered for until their cardiovascular systems collapsed under the cumulative obesity brought about by sedentary decades of isolation and over-feeding. There was a saying in the Crawl: the only way in life is down. That was what everyone in the mid-secs lived in fear of. No-one returned, once they went lo.

Your life was over with if you did. You were done.

Those in the hi-secs were born there, and there they stayed. Celeste had never seen, or heard of a module dropping from the hi-secs. She shook a sugarshot free from a greased wrapper found in her pocket and crunched the cube into granules between her teeth, trying to forget what she'd seen and how it was making her feel.

Would you like to update status?

The phrase blinked persistently in the corner of her vision. It came from CrawlSpace, the social thought-network synched into every soulwire. When you came out of your compression cycle, you were logged in automatically and only logged out when you slept. Prompts and notifications from CrawlSpace were a part of life. To not update status was seen as a *faux pas* at best, and a violation at worst. It was a means of tracking every citizen's thoughts and feelings. A constant census of public, and private, mood. The chatter of the Crawl was a low-level background drone that could never be switched off, except by death. Nothing existed in the Crawl that did not serve the people. There was no safe space here. Freedom wasn't free.

Celeste updated status: *end of shift can't come fast enough.*

Let them make of that what they will. With the familiar hiss of docking at the Compound, Celeste disembarked from the hub-car and let muscle-memory carry her forward on feet that were already aching

inside her over-tight boots. Maybe a few hours in the Flood would wash this shit feeling away.

She hoped so.

Chapter Three

He walked along the polished corridors of his past achievements, aching to exist again. So long alone, so far removed from the world below. How much longer could he go on? A little longer, a little more. He'd received feedback from the Flood telling him the time for returning would be soon. After centuries suspended among the stars, it seemed impossible (almost) that this limbo state was coming to an end. They had been warned by the scientists and philosophers such a thing as they wanted to achieve could take thousands upon thousands of years. And he had said in reply that he was willing to wait that long.

'The probability figures alone are astronomical, Chairman!'

'The probability does exist then?'

'Yes. Every probability exists, as potential, no matter how remote.'

'I am willing to wait until it does exist.'

'But, sir…'

'I will wait. However long it takes. No matter the cost.'

He stopped walking; an action that took half an hour as the command made its way from the artificial neural nest inside the preserved coral of his brain through the hi-optic wires of his central nervous system to the ossified muscles themselves. The height of technology kept him going, but even that had its limits. He placed a fragile hand on the carved walnut frieze that decorated the wall, remembering its smoothness and curves rather than feeling them.

They never said it could not be done and, as money to support the research and development was never in question, they set to work like good little scientists should. It was the ultimate triumph of capitalism over communism, he thought. A man, or woman, will work hard for the good of the people, if they are so motivated, but with enough money at your disposal you can buy dedication beyond price. For the good of themselves, their families, the scientific community, progress – the reasons they conjured up to justify their actions did not matter to him. Never did. As long as the cash kept flowing into their bank accounts, they kept on working. Morality and other considerations be damned. Science might be objective but her practitioners were not so limited, and there were always plenty of willing young volunteers to replace the old ones when they began to die from age and exhaustion.

After several hours making his way down the corridor, he came to a blank wall of polished black glass. Reaching out with a neural relay command, he made the opacity dissolve before his eyes. It revealed a landscape of pale craters and sunken mountains. Somewhere out

there, the footprints of the first man on the moon were still preserved – so he'd heard. It was probably nonsense. A pleasant romance to believe in; something that he was immunised to by the amount of time he'd endured alone.

And, there she was, in partial eclipse, his mistress; the Earth.

Time had been no kinder to her than to him.

There'd been no wars in the beginning. His kind had helped to move humanity beyond the primitive action of open conflict before most people were aware of it. All confrontations retreated behind closed doors into clean, tidy boardrooms where the real power resided.

War, conflict, bloodshed; all these things became better described as transactions. It was an imperceptible shift in global relationships that would have ramifications a few comprehended – and he was one of those few. A secret architect and engineer of things to come.

Gradually, the countries and continents of the world became obsolete as concepts. Protest votes and cultural retreats superficially intent on halting global progress became the trigger mechanism that assisted with incorporating every human being on the planet. The ultimate merger – or takeover bid.

The Americas ceased to exist. Eurasia went into receivership. Australia held out for a while, but it could not resist industrial imperative in the end. Corporate Identity (CI) replaced country and nationality; Asia became The Grid, Europe was BP-Esso, the Americas rebranded as AMart, Australia named itself the NAB Commonwealth, and Africa – the economic dumping ground of them all – a nameless wasteland.

The CIs themselves were an extension of corporate business as boards and panels ruled the decision-making processes previously undertaken by governments and aristocracies. Puppet administrations bequeathed more and more power and influence to artificially-intelligent mainframes that oversaw every single global transaction. In time, the men and women of the boards aged, withered, and died – a few could afford to be cryogenically frozen.

Like me, he thought, *and we built Antara station as our sanctuary.*

The AI mainframes were left in charge and through augmentation, took over management of the Earth and thereby the recently-constructed Crawl. It wasn't long before there was no division between AI and CI. They became the companies, and for the citizens who dwelt in the Crawl, the CIs might as well have been gods. The rich of Antara were content for this situation to continue as it did not disrupt their closeted lives one iota. As long as trace elements were mined from the Earth and the people of the Crawl knew their place, there was no cause for concern.

Now, the Flood was the masterstroke and the unexpected key to achieving his goal. It had its roots in the earliest social media platforms launched in the 21st century. With progress came the increasing integration of those platforms not only with one another but also with the Flood's nascent form: the internet. The wealth of data being generated indicated digital communication had a particular, unexpected effect upon its global audience. The ease and ability to widely share the details of one's own life were out-distanced in value by the global audience's ability to self-regulate and cognitively isolate 'unwanted' dissenting elements.

Popular fears had historically been centred around government and corporate oppression of free thought and expression. The success of social media and the internet showed that the people were far more adept at achieving this on their own. Dissent was steadily reduced to private channels that dwindled over time until compliance and apolitical escapism became the norm.

There had been no plan to start with, no hidden agenda, no conspiracy by the powers that be. The people had done it to themselves, willingly. With free speech outmoded, nationalities and all other boundaries practically eliminated, the Crawl became inevitable; a mass integration of humanity steadily travelling a path to an end only he had guessed at – and his scientists had argued was practically impossible. It was close now, almost within his grasp. He had been there when the first anti-grav stanchions were erected and would be there at the end – for the final ascension. Placing two withered hands against the glass, wishing to feel its coolness, he quietly addressed the Earth, "What I have done, I have done alone. For you. For us. For one and all."

Thus spake the man in the moon.

Chapter Four

Each mid-sec had a Compound. A narrow, cylindrical structure striped with fluorescence where all transit links, horizontal and vertical, connected. There was nowhere to go except to work. An honest day's work for an honest day's pay. This is what everyone lived for, whether they liked it or not. On the surface of things, the people ran the sector: accounting, processing, resources, everything was handled at the Compound. Every data-stream originated there. Every stream carried more than a hundred thousand programme channels: WarZone, SpeakPeace, FakeNews, OpinionEd, Transfigur8, Re:Cycle, Last Moments, SexAde and many, many others. The streams stayed live day and night, flowing out to the populace constantly. Without the streams, there would be discontent and infraction. Everyone who worked in the Compound knew this. Everyone who worked was reminded of this on a regular basis. Everyone who worked in the Compound worked harder and harder and then harder still, believing they were all that stood between order and chaos.

Each Compound had co-ordinators who set the deadlines for task completion. To miss deadlines meant increasing the risk of being reset to zero. Miss too many and your module would be dropped. Every worker had a pod, where they spent eighteen hours of each day wired into the Flood: an ocean of data that comprised the daily interactions of every living soul in the Crawl. Every thought was an undercurrent, every feeling a potential riptide. Every worker was tasked with preserving Crawl stability through their assigned tasks.

Celeste was a seer-class chaser. When she plugged in, it was her job to defuse traces – rogue memories polluting the Flood. With eleven billion people in the Crawl, that was a lot to deal with. She knew the chasers didn't even come close to defusing all the traces loose in the Flood. But it was a job that had to be seen to be done. Like everyone else in the Compound, Celeste was analogous to Sisyphus; cursed with a task that would never be completed.

Celeste ascended to the third level of the Compound in a pressure elevator, which groaned and hissed with age. Its retractable doors stuck when they tried to open. Celeste gave them a shove, making the mountings creak under the unexpected strain. She was heading across the level to her pod when Breda, her co-ordinator, got in the way. "You're late for shift."

Celeste sighed. "There was a drop on my route this morning."

"There's always a drop on your route. There's always a drop on everyone's route," she said, pointedly. "These things happen and are invalid reasons for being late."

“There’ve been a lot of drops in my grid over the last month,” Celeste said.

“Then I suggest you move to a better grid.”

Celeste scowled and pushed past Breda. There were no better grids. All were the same. The mid-secs were an exercise in redundancy. Every bloc and strip was a copy of its neighbours. Only the lights and the graffiti people used to mark their territory differed. Breda was right about one thing though: she was slacking off.

I could’ve taken an earlier hub-car. The 8:12. I’ve been cutting it fine for the best part of a month.

But, Celeste felt no inclination to improve.

I’m tired. Dead tired.

Crawl-life was a grind. It was half a life, if that, and there was nothing to be done about it. There was no job security, and the increase in v-borns meant the competition to stay above zero was growing harder. If you did not perform as required, you would not be in work the next day. There was always a younger, spryer v-born waiting to replace you. Simple.

The process of being reduced to zero used to be based on performance patterns over weeks, months, even years – if you believed what elder Crawlers had to say. Now, it was all fast-tracked. One bad day, and you could be done. Some would say it was because she was getting old, but Celeste was sure they were working everyone harder and harder. The pace was relentless. The pressure unyielding. The reason: integrity of the Crawl had to be maintained at all costs. What those costs were, no-one explained, or knew. To ask the question would result in a lecture about adding value, high-performance indicators, business drivers and all the other meaningless buzzfeed phrases.

At least, Celeste thought, *I have the Flood.* It was the one thing that kept her going, that made work endurable. She stripped off her fibe-suit and began the familiar process of plugging herself into the pod’s matrix. As she did so, Celeste gazed out over the level. Each pod was a tarnished black egg. Arranged in rows, as they were, they made the area look like the nest of some gigantic alien insect. The plexiglass exterior of each egg was semi-opaque, enabling her to make out the shape of other chasers but none of their features. As with so much about the Crawl, here was redundancy and anonymity; people reduced to vague shadows and empty ghosts. Someone was coming down the row of pods towards her. She didn’t recognise her, only the body type: dull eyes, glossy lips, light brown skin and a childlike, stick-insect body – a v-born. The butterfly-fragile creature stopped by Celeste’s pod. She was wearing a fibe-suit that was barely dirty, coloured with a spectrum design that slowly shifted through every colour in prismatic

variations.

Not cheap. Heavy sheckle goods.

Celeste suspected someone else had bought that suit for her.

Big favour return.

She knew which department this girl-child was from before she spoke. “Hi. I’m Simran from HR. Can I check your connections please?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

All of the Human Resources staff were v-borns; not a single natural-born cell among them. The smile Simran gave her was fixed and programmed. Their brains were vestigial, and so, Celeste heard, were other parts of their body. It was said they were much more submissive and easier to bring to orgasm than a natural-born woman. The men of the Crawl loved them mad, unsurprisingly. Less effort needed always wins approval.

The mid-secs were a real hive of ‘mixed meat’, these days – a term Celeste hated because it smacked of old-time prejudice. Entire hate channels were devoted to those who thought v-born citizens should be deleted. She didn’t think so, but the way men, and some women, flocked around girls like Simran left her with a feeling she preferred to leave undefined. The tinge of isolation made her reach into the pod’s dispenser for a pink, to buzz up her mood. No matter what overlays she used to brighten, sharpen, or darken the world, that particular reality, was closed off to her – always out of reach.

She knew Simran was running a standard diagnostic check, ensuring Celeste was operating within parameters and not dropping off the authorised Compound streams to connect with illegal channels or lo-sec threads. Celeste watched the metallic shimmer of the girl’s hair. Her hand raised, involuntarily, but then stopped. Was she going to touch Simran’s hair – see how real it felt, or did not feel – or tear it out at the roots for the hell of it?

Simran finished the diagnostic check and raised her head, giving Celeste that dumb, bland smile again. “That’s all fine. You may connect now. Have a good shift. Shalom.”

Celeste fake-smiled and nodded her thanks. “Shalom.”

Her stare followed Simran for a moment as she walked away. Her skin was crawling with the need to both touch and hurt the girl. She tore her gaze away and finished prepping for the first chase of the day.

Closing her eyes, Celeste touched a finger to the nodule under her earlobe, gently manipulating and stroking it in a different way to when she’d been conjuring an overlay earlier in the hub-car. This time, she was going deep, into the Flood. A tremor went through her body as she felt her soulwire engage. This was the part she always

dug. It began as a slight flickering in the periphery. This was the Flood tuning in to the unique rhythms of her brain's synaptic flow. The sensation of connecting was, at first, like falling: triggering a primal instinct that made the muscles clench against impact. She let the falling take her, and though her eyes were closed, she could see her body appear to be undoing itself, silently flaying away into nano-streams of coruscating light that extended on and on in all directions, spreading out and out to create a unifying web.

She was mere consciousness here, without body, without form. The thought of herself, her name alone, had to be held onto. This initial rush was why people loved the Flood – you felt so much of a part of something, of so many people, that to disconnect was to feel loss, to become minute and isolated from a universe you felt at one with.

It wasn't called the Flood for nothing either; every day, people became lost in it. Rogue surges broke apart the matrices of their thought patterns, shattering selves into pieces, consuming them and leaving only traces behind. These traces were her quarry.

Celeste Walker held onto herself until the rush passed and she was fully initialised. Algorithms rendered themselves as steady pulses, passing through the web- structure visual of the Flood. It was different to triggering an overlay; this felt like the skin of reality had been peeled back to reveal what lay beneath – *the truth*.

Time to chase down a trace.

You had to be tough to be a chaser. Traces were loaded with memories and vibes. Once they got inside your head, you needed to be able to keep yourself separate. It wasn't easy to do that. Some chasers went under. Too much contact with other consciousnesses drove them out of their minds. Afterwards, they were taken back to their modules, their fried brains wired in, zeroed out, and quietly dropped.

Celeste felt a shift like a change in sea pressure. Heavy shadow passed over the web visual, making it fragment. A CI was in the Flood, deep-scanning. You reconned them in the same way a school of fish feels the presence of an undersea predator. Best thing was to be mind-still until they were gone. This one lingered, letting itself weigh upon the thought-patterns of all those in proximity. She saw a few lights go out nearby – death by corporate identity.

The shadow lifted. The CI had moved on, and Celeste felt a familiar break in one of the light-flows nearby. She could sense it as fluctuation, a wild splintering of fractals and indefinite shapes. She drifted towards it, imagining herself reaching out with an invisible hand.

She took a breath, a ghost-reflex, as she made contact; the next step in the process, and the most hazardous. If this went wrong, she

could end up lost in the Flood. The tell-tale flickering at the edge of her periphery alerted her that another shift in perception was about to occur.

Celeste went in. She plunged her imaginary hand into the heart of the fluctuation. A violent surge of sensation punched into her cortex. Viral tears bled from unreal eyes. Blood ran into her mouth as she bit down on tongue and cheek. This trace had a lot of hurt inside.

Everything changed. The Flood's non-space evaporated as reverse-rain. The web-structure ebbed away. A sense of space and sound developed, along with the ripening of odours and the emergence of flesh-and-bone bodies. She felt floor beneath her feet, and the heavy bass of thunderous nu-music resonating in her gut. Looking around, she saw people and place take shape, resolve into clarity.

Memory comprised the bulk of a trace, and it behaved like a protective outer shell. She had to get to the core of the trace in order to defuse it. She looked down and saw she was someone else: an ebony man with an elegant body, multi-coloured dreads and a self-graphitised fibe-suit. The illusion would have to be maintained, or she would be perceived as an anomaly within the trace, which could turn on her as an immune system turns on invasive bacteria. This was another risk. If she spent too long isolating the core to defuse the trace, she could lose her sense of self and become a part of the illusion, drifting around the Flood. Her body shipped back to her module for zeroing and the drop. She wondered how many chasers were down in the lo-secs, vegetating their lives away, and how long it would be until she joined them.

Chapter Five

The trace-memory was a party, mapped out over several rooms, all heaving with people. They were younger than Celeste, making her feel self-conscious, despite wearing a body that matched theirs. The music was so loud that she couldn't hear what was being said around her, or to her, most of the time. Barrel-tanks of alcohol rested against the walls at irregular junctures, corrugated pipes ran from each one to a crude release-valve that, when turned, let out a foaming gush of vape-cold beer. The core of the trace would be a person the memory belonged to. Sometimes, this was easy – especially if they were the only person in the trace. This was not going to be easy.

She pushed through the boorish crowd, looking for obvious signs. There was little regulated behaviour here, which was often a feature of Flood-born fantasies. Dreams of a life outside the modules, hub-cars, and toxin-clouds.

Celeste saw a frail girl sitting alone, sipping at a bottle that bore an animated DiGi-label of a winking cat in a top hat. She wasn't making eye contact with other partygoers and seemed to be there with no-one. She was clad in a long-sleeved T-shirt, a black polka-dot skirt, bright yellow leggings and unlaced army boots. Her lank whitish hair fell in front of her eyes. This could be the core she was looking for.

"*Heia*, you okay?" Celeste asked.

The girl looked up, startled, showing pupils dilated enough to almost obliterate colour from the corneas. She was drinking dim-water, dulling her emotions to cope. *She must really hate this party,* Celeste thought, *though not enough to absent herself altogether*. *Strange, why would someone stay somewhere they hated so much?* She thought about how she felt about the Crawl, the Compound, and deleted the question from her mind. She knew the answer as well as this girl did.

When there's nowhere else to go, you stay where you are. The core of the trace was an equation to be solved, and Celeste came to the answer as she watched the girl swaying and nodding to herself. This was a bad memory of a party where nothing happened, so she needed to make something happen. She had to change the narrative in order to defuse the trace. She sat down and put her hand on the girl's knee. The girl flinched away, looking at her with eyes that said, *What're you doing?*

"What's your name?"

"Grace."

Celeste paused.

Can't be, not the same girl from the dropped module.

"You want to go somewhere, Grace?"

The hazy girl nodded, either in consent or from too much dim-water. Celeste didn't have time to worry about which was the correct answer. This was a trace. Nothing and no-one was real. She could do no harm here.

Celeste took Grace by the hand and led her through the crowd away from the party. It took a small mental shove of the trace's architecture to create a room. This was delicate work – she didn't want to signal to the trace that it had been infiltrated. The girl appeared fragile. Celeste was handling something that could go off in her face at any moment.

In the room, she began to undress, trying not to look for too long at the handsome male body she was inhabiting. The way the muscles moved, the stirrings of sexual excitement were a distraction she could become lost in. How it felt for a man. She had to keep her distance, preserve the emotional disconnect. How much of the body's behaviour was her doing, and how much the trace? There was no way to tell.

Tread light, tread careful. That's all I have to do.

The subconscious moves in mysterious ways, especially when disturbed.

Celeste's thoughts were clinical and cold as she let her fingers move over the girl's body, helping her to disrobe, too. The girl's fearful rigidity loosened as the minutes went by. It had been a while since she'd used sex to get to the core of a trace, but some things had to be done.

They were lying on a comp-couch larger than Celeste's module. The girl moved slowly, reciprocating Celeste's advances tentatively, shyly. Naked, they crawled over each other's skin, using mouths and fingers to explore one another inside and out. The couch reacted to them. Recognising their activity, it moved in time with their bodies, reducing friction and softening textures. The warmth of the couch increased, heightening the mood. She'd read somewhere that some couches could exude pheromones, further intensifying the action.

Careful, careful, don't get lost. Remember who you are.

… the wheels on the bus go round and round… all day long…

Celeste took a mental breath and caught herself. The couch was no more a reality than the girl was. This was a trace, a memory – a fantasy that shaped according to its core. She'd almost lost herself, taken too much to be real. *Bad, very bad.*

Her sense reasserted, Celeste noticed the girl's earlier coolness and rigidity returning. She knew something was wrong. There was a clearness in the girl's eyes. I let myself get in too deep. First-time mistake, and I've been doing this shit for long years.

"This didn't happen last time." Grace's eyes met Celeste's. "This didn't happen at all."

The girl moved away, climbing off the bed. “What’re you here for? Why’re you doing this to me?”

This was it: the moment the trace defused, or began to rebuild itself around Celeste instead.

Grace understood. This wasn’t real.

This was life or death time.

And, with realisation… came the defusing.

Celeste felt it in the same way she felt her module’s airlock lose pressure. She should’ve felt relieved, that was how it usually was, but she felt sad. The girl’s eyes were open wounds, and she had been the architect of the pain resting there.

This trace had a lot of hurt in it – did she feel the pain before it happened? Was that possible?

… round and round… all day long…

Far too deep. I’m caring. Feeling. Losing distance. I should be able to touch and not to feel. The art of defusing. She could see the trace degrading around her. The sounds of people outside evaporated, and the room she’d created lost definition. Grace remained. She held the girl’s gaze but didn’t respond to her. She couldn’t. The degradation would be interrupted if she did, and the trace would rebuild itself, establishing a new pocket-reality around Celeste, locking her into its fabric permanently. It was a human thing to do – to respond, to reach out, to try to make a connection – but in here, it could be the end of you.

“Say something! Doesn’t this mean anything to you? Am I nothing? Don’t I exist?” the girl demanded. “Fuck you! Fucking fuck you! *Say something to me, you heartless cunt!*”

“You are nothing to me.”

The words were the final trigger. She might as well have put a bullet through the girl’s forehead. The trace collapsed, fragmenting into nothingness. Grace’s tear-lined face was the last thing to go. For a moment, it looked like the face she’d seen staring out at her from the module drop earlier that day. Distraught. Despairing. Preserved. Lost. Alone.

Gone.

Chapter Six

The man in the moon felt something.

It had been a long time since he'd last felt something. Pain was a ghost to him. Love, pride, hate, and fear were more distant still. This was different, a connection registered in his neural relay. A trace element from the Flood had gotten through. As the moon was separated from the Earth by the void, so Antara station – and himself – were separated from the mass of humanity by conceptual acres of sub-space ice. It might have been possible for a master-navigator to bypass the multipartite failsafe grids and polymorphic drones but this was not that because he could *feel* something, an emotion, which had slipped past every line of defence.

Grief; a sure, fine and thinly-woven thread, piercing him from all the way down there. He might have wept from its sudden, unexpected sting except his tear ducts had been surgically removed at his own request. How could this be? He must know.

The man in the moon does not weep.

He closed the mollusc shells that were his eyelids, reached out, and cast his consciousness across the space between worlds. The colours and sounds of humanity's existence battered at his senses, so used to the unchanging white-grey whispers of the moon was he. The collective consciousness of his species was an unwieldy mass bearing down on him; a gargantuan weight of kaleidoscopic filigrees threatening to shred his mind into micro-pieces. And then, as always, it passed. They could not overcome, or undo him. He was master and creator here. The Flood was his realm – and it paused at his behest.

He was at the party, at the point when the trace was disintegrating. He walked through the frozen crowd of young people; finding them of interest only in the same fashion a collector admires an insect specimen before he kills and mounts it with a pin. The thread of grief originated here. He could still feel it keenly, as a piece of icy glass lodged inside his chest. The source of it drew him on until, thanks to a data-glitch, he walked through a wall and found himself in the same room as Celeste and Grace; both naked and raw from one another.

It was not unlike many scenes he'd seen before. In the days before the Flood and the Crawl, he'd paid men and women to do whatever he wished to see. One particular time, he'd been in the company of the Russian President watching the soon-to-be American President get his money's worth from a gaggle of young prostitutes. They were putting on a golden shower performance for the old man. The man in the moon couldn't remember if he'd been more appalled, or amused, by

the spectacle as the geriatric toad who would become crown-king of the West clapped along to a whore defecating in another whore's mouth.

Afterwards, the Russian President took him on a private visit to Chechnya where they had set up special camps to dispose of the gay population. The Russian had droned on about the camps being for the good of the people, something about societal purity, and protection of the children. The usual nonsense. The Russian was undoubtedly a shrewder man than the dull creature he was grooming for the White House, but that did not make him any less tedious. The hypocrisy was also deeper, as the man in the moon did regularly procure underage boys for the Russian to rape and abuse.

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair…

The man in the moon was a businessman, then and now. He was not concerned with nationalistic moral dimensions that politicians obsessed over; only with learning further methods of getting what he wanted.

This was what he had travelled to Chechnya to see; a dirty concrete room where man after beaten man was brought in and made to shit and piss himself as wires were inserted into bruised, sweating skin and electricity coursed through his flesh. The man in the moon was amused by erections the Chechen torturers were sporting as they brutalised their victims. He watched and listened to the shouts of religious condemnation and the screams of pain, impressed by the simplicity of the method and the results it achieved.

For all his love of technology's endless complexities, sometimes the hammer applied correctly is all you need to keep someone in their place. And, returning to the present, he knew this woman, wearing a man's aspect, had wounded him with her pain.

She needed to be put in her place.

He'd return the grief she'd dealt to him a thousand-fold. He placed an undead hand on her shoulder and made it happen, in the same way the Chechen torturers marked their victims. Grief coursed through her, burning her soul to its roots, leaving scars that could not be seen or undone. Then, he deleted his presence before she could be made aware of it. His work was done.

The Flood unpaused.

He disconnected and returned to the moon.

Chapter Seven

Celeste disconnected hard. She couldn't see for tears. That had been rough. The worst trace she'd dealt with. She felt like a murderer as she stepped out of the pod, and dropped to the floor, trying to catch her breath.

…you are nothing to me…

"No," Celeste whispered. "You were… something."

You were real.

"Walker." Breda's voice said from above.

Celeste looked up, unable to get up.

"Your shift still has twelve hours left. You have defused one trace. Not enough."

"I need a break."

"Twenty mins, then back in your pod."

Celeste snapped a thin smile and headed to the canteria. She'd lost her headspace completely, and needed to realign. She could feel the eyes of other chasers following her. Although most of them were plugged in, she knew that she was subconsciously overlaying without engaging her soulwire.

In the canteria, she sat in a booth. On a tray in front of her, a nuke-pac sweated plastic condensation. Its yellow, semi-liquid contents bulged when she prodded it with a finger. She should eat; tear open the packaging and swallow it down like a black or a sugarshot, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Real food would be good. Something wholesome and solid, but she didn't have the shecks for that kind of expense. Her feet hurt, so she shucked off her boots and unpeeled her foot-sheaths. That felt better. Someone sat down in the booth without asking. It was Fenya, another chaser, younger than Celeste. "You're not looking so great, Cee."

"I had a rough one. Real bad. An emotive trace."

"Ouch. How'd you defuse it?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"Fair one. What's up?"

"It knocked me out yuge, but I'm feeling them all super-bigly these days. The forty is coming up. I'm getting old, and I can see most the other chasers are ten younger than me. Some, even more."

"You're experienced. You're good. You're strong. That's why you're still here? How many other chasers started out same one as you and're they still here?"

Celeste shrugged and shook her head.

"That's what I mean," Fenya said, "none of the rest got this far. They either dropped or lost it. You're still going. That means

something."

"Does it? Lot of good it's done me. Same pod every day for twenty. Same journey in and out. Same module that smells of old shit and pipe-waste."

It was Fenya's turn to shrug, "Mine smells of sweat and boiled clothes. You want to swap? Can throw my kiddles in too, if you like."

Celeste smirked. "How many more times can I do this, Fen? How many more times before I come out and there's no me left. My matrix can't hold forever. With each translation, I'm feeling less of me gets back out. It's eating away who I am. Give it not much more, I'll become a memory, lost inside the thoughts and feelings of someone else. The traces I defuse never really die, y'know. I remember them. I feel them. After doing this for twenty, that's a lot of trace-crud. A lot of bad memories that aren't even mine. Do you know how many good memories we hold onto? Not many."

"You're not thinking of getting wiped and reset, are you?" Fenya asked.

"No," Celeste said, slowly. "I don't think so."

"I knew someone who tried. Thought a clean brain would be a clean start. Those wipe-clinics though. *Allah!* She might as well have pickled her brain and put it in a jar."

"That bad?"

"They had to hub her back from the clinic with a med-droid. There was nothing left behind her eyes. All gone. Went down to zero the next day and they dropped her. She's in the lo-secs somewhere, what's left that is, vegging out to channels twenty-four-seven for the rest of her lifespan."

"No, I don't want to be reset," Celeste said. "But I know I'm not going to last much longer here before I lose a trace, get lost in one myself, or fuck up some other way."

"Who'd I have to share my brown with then, eh?" Fenya asked, raising her cup of water. The liquid was murky and taste neutral. It had been put through so many filters that all minerals, chemicals, and pollutants had been sterilised – supposedly – leaving a cup of wet, tasteless nothing. Some said all water in the Crawl was urine recyc. Most preferred not to think about it too much. Like nuke-pacs, it helped keep you alive, and that was all that mattered.

"How've you done it, though?" Fenya asked. "If all the others from your start have gone, I mean. You have a secret?"

"Tight boots," Celeste answered.

"Excuse me?"

"I started wearing boots a size too small the last time I started feeling old and tired like this. Believe me, it takes your mind off things when you spend most days cursing the boots you're wearing."

“Whatever works, my friend. Whatever keeps you getting up in the morning and putting your feet on the damn platform.”

“What happens when you get up but don’t put your feet on the damn platform?”

“You get dropped.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You be careful,” Fenya said, finishing her tepid water with an unsatisfied gulp. “Too much thinking can do you in, and you’ve got more going around in that head of yours than most of us. You’ve gotta keep going. Don’t you want a raise – end up in the hi-secs?”

“What we’re all supposed to want, isn’t it? Nice big module in the hi-secs? Real food pipe, rather than monthly nuke-pac deposits? I don’t think I want it anymore. I did once, maybe. If I did still, I’d be pushing and getting something out of chasing traces. The want has gone, and I don’t know what I need.”

“Get some more sleep. You could use some. It’s getting too dark under your eyes.”

“I have dreams.”

“Then dial your comp-couch up high. Shut ’em out. Get yourself some real oblivion.”

She smiled to acknowledge Fenya’s words. She was a friend trying to help.

Fenya held her gaze for a moment then sighed and got to her feet. “Come on. Boots on. That’s twenty mins done. Back to our pods we go.”

Celeste followed Fenya to the pressure-elevator, staying a few steps behind.

“Come on, Celeste. All aboard.”

Celeste jumped on as the elevator started to rise with a wheeze of imperfect pressure. She tried to focus, readjust and find her headspace as she returned to her pod. It wasn’t coming together. London bridge kept falling down. And she had no king’s horses and men to put her back together again.

Chapter Eight

Breda was there, outside the pod, waiting. “You’re a minute over. It’ll be deducted from your lifespan.”

That meant an hour less in the comp-couch later on, and, at the end of her career, deduction from Crawl life-support systems. Work hard and you live longer to work harder. Work not so hard, and your life expectancy reduced. She’d left the nuke-pac untouched on the tray downstairs. That was stupid. She’d not regenned enough. It’d felt good to talk to Fenya, but now she was back, a weight was settling over her.

Celeste climbed obediently into the pod and tried to focus, to drop inside herself and find the still-point before engaging her soulwire.

“That’s enough prep. Connect,” Breda ordered.

Celeste watched Breda open a panel on the pod’s base and punch in the override; a Compound policy addition that hijacked the soulwire and forced a user to connect with the Flood.

…Fuuuck…

Celeste plunged in with all the grace and control of having her head shoved underwater. She floundered and thrashed as the architecture of the Flood assembled in a white storm of violent noise. She reached out. It all felt like the falling. She saw the flows rush at her like out-of-control hub-cars. There was a trace within reach. She lunged for it without thinking and went in, hoping to find some space and stability there.

……

“Excuse me, Miss, are you all right?”

She looked around and saw she was in a restaurant under a geodesic dome. Outside was a cratered grey-white landscape. She was on the moon – this was Antara. Diners, all wearing fine black-tie evening wear, sat at the *faux*-wood tables scattered in every direction. As she watched, a sequinned dress lost definition and a suit jacket degraded into a glimpse of standard issue fibe-wear.

The rich aren’t as bigly in sheckles as they pretend to be. Not so yuge above us Crawlers after all.

Her gaze turned towards the Earth cresting over the far horizon outside the dome – not blue, white, and beautiful as it was in the old pictographs but grey, yellow and brown, with a darkness eclipsing much of its surface. From here, the Crawl looked like cancer eating up the Earth while the planet slept in coma. It was near enough truth. The vibrations from the mining drills were said to be the cause of most Crawl-quakes. Down went the gargantuan machines to chew up

the Earth and eke out whatever scant resources remained buried in her crust. Sometimes, they caught on something, or disturbed the aged tectonic plates so bad the whole Crawl suffered for it.

Still, ugly as it was, there remained a majesty and wonder in seeing the defiled Earth rise.

Must be a fantasy trace, she thought. *No-one in the Flood could've been this high up and come back down.* The moon was to the hi-secs as heaven was to hell.

Celeste took a moment to appraise who she was in this trace: a statuesque beauty with a coil of platinum blonde hair falling over one shoulder. She ran her perfectly manicured hands over the red silk dress her body was clad in. Trace it might be, but the dress felt Real. Celeste had never possessed a shred of Real. She blinked to stop tears forming in her eyes. A touch of Real could get you lost in a trace; the mem-feel was enough to tip you over the edge.

A young man was standing by her side, a waiter dressed in a corroded black-tie holograph, holding a home-pad. Celeste could see the sweat beading his skin, which was pale with marks of unlasered acne. His eyes were dull and underscored by shadows, He had prematurely greying hair that hung lank and greasy.

"Can I take your order, please?"

Celeste realised she was holding a menu, and looked down at it. The words on it wouldn't form. Was there a glitch in the trace? She blinked again and shook her head, trying to clear away a strange black patch that was spreading over her vision, much like how the shadow of the Crawl obscured the Earth's surface.

"Excuse me, Miss. Are you all right?"

Celeste shook her head again, opened and closed her eyes. The darkness wouldn't go away.

"I'm sorry to hear that. May I get you some refreshment…?"

The words on the menu had become clear, and she didn't like what she saw. The same words, repeating themselves in standard and italic fonts. She could feel a pressure building in her head. A convulsion shook through the body she was wearing, travelling from her feet up to her head. Something was wrong with the face; it felt loose, like it was hanging off the bone. She opened her mouth to speak, but the words that came out were spoken by something other, though they were also the words printed across the menu.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round."

She felt herself going into a spasm as the words continued to spill out.

"…round and round… all day long…"

"Can I help you?" the waiter's words, as he crumpled to the ground, were nonsensical and as pointless as her own. She felt the

need to put her hand over his mouth, to stop him from saying those words again. They felt like a trigger-command – a piece of unknown code that was causing a chain reaction.

Through her failing eyes, she saw the other diners, all trembling and transfixed, staring into space as if their bodies had been switched off. Were some of them speaking their own empty words as a litany? She couldn't be sure their lips were moving. Had this already gone too far? She could see the waiter crawling on his side towards her, hand reaching out to seal her mouth shut, to stop whatever was happening. But Celeste knew the words would not be stopped so easily. They would undo his hand, cut through it and continue decreating the reality around them until there was nothing left. The truth of this was a vibration coursing through her bones that forced the words out again. *"…the wheels on the bus go round and round, all day long…"*

The waiter joined her in spasm, jerking and twisting across the polished floor. She watched his flesh fall away and dark fluid pour thickly from the holes opening like mouths in his body. The other occupants of the restaurant were suffering a similar fate. She could no longer see them, but she could hear their pain as transmission.

A screed of white noise pierced Celeste to the core.

Blackness followed – and the words were gone, lost. Agony spread. No place. This is no place. *No place like home.* A shiver reached all the way down to her toes. She was dead. Alone in the dark. Celeste wanted to move, to cry out. There were some words she needed to remember, to stop her from getting lost in here…

… lost where?…

Can't remember.

Celeste closed her eyes and wished she were someplace else.

… there's no place like home…

*

Opening her eyes, she found herself back inside her module.

Celeste didn't recall coming home. There was no vestige of memory, and the Crawl was a place where memories were currency. She got to her feet, trembling. Going into the Flood was one thing, but mind and body transferring through it was something else. Impossible. She didn't even know how she'd done it, if that was what she'd done.

She looked in the holo-mirror and saw someone else: platinum blonde, bluish neon-implant eyes, statuesque figure and face with an exotic bird's fine bone structure. She traced the contours of the alien visage, put a hand up to her face, felt warm skin that was real yet not her own. She could feel bones and tendons inside the long, clairvoyant

fingers, with elegant, particle-dusted nails. She was still the woman from the trace – outside the Flood.

How?

But, as she watched, the woman's face degraded steadily, and her own body reasserted itself, pushing the other back out of reality. However, it'd been no overlay, no holograph; the most sophisticated hardlight projection couldn't achieve that sense of reality – could it?

No, they could mimic weight and shape but not the warmth of a body. The feeling of tendons and the movement of bones. She was looking at herself in the mirror again – the ghost of the woman's artificial eye colour fading away. Celeste was Celeste again, so who'd that woman been?

She sat down and tried to stop shaking, but that didn't work, so she punched her console's keypad until it spat out what she wanted. She crunched a black between her teeth to take the edge off. So many of her highs over the years had been manufactured that to experience a natural one felt disturbing and unreal.

Harsh sound punctured the silence.

The Mickey Mouse telephone in the corner of the module was juddering about on the spot. An ugly spider-web crack marred Mickey's yellowed face. The dots of his eyes lit up, blinking a faltering red LED glow. He was a piece of junk she'd picked up at a trade-share. He wasn't connected, just a curio adding colour to the grey square feet of her life. He shouldn't be making a sound. She picked up the receiver from the cradle formed by Mickey's ears with fingers that felt irreal and not quite her own. She listened. There was a low static hiss on the line. It was followed by a calm, measured voice that said, "Celeste Walker?"

"Yes?"

"Please be patient. We are trying to connect you."

She heard an old-fashioned *click,* and the line went dead.

Chapter Nine

Celeste lay awake for the rest of the night with her head pounding, sweating cold into clinging sheets. She lay there, counting off each breath, each minute, and each hour left until the artificial dawn. The ceiling coloured with the creeping blue of insomniac night as she lay there, waiting to hear sirens, to see the red lights, waiting for her module to be dropped. Unfamiliar blood pumped through an unfamiliar heart, so it seemed. She saw the shapes and forms of her module's space through eyes that felt wrong in a skull ill-shaped. She felt longer and thinner, shrunken and twisted up all at once. She wanted to tear her hair out at the roots and scream. Blood and violence played out behind her eyes as she scratched fingernails chewed down to the quick along arms that were hers and not hers. What'd been done to her? Why couldn't she feel at home in her own body again?

Outside, the Crawl's many voices, servos and engines conversed with one another like the overlapping threads of a fractured channel. She got out of the comp-couch, took out a breakfast nuke-pac from the storage compartment, and sighed.

Something had gotten to the pac.

The modules of each bloc were interconnected by a webwork of pipes, tubules, and cables that catered to the needs of the populace. Most of the pipes had become clogged and filthy like old arteries. Whatever came through was tainted by whatever had passed through before. Automated cleaning drones were supposed to detox the insta-serv pipes twenty-four-seven but, as everyone was high or switched-off in some way, who cared if the foodstuff tasted bad before getting on the hub-car for another day of Compound work?

The packaging on this one was torn, leaking tangerine fluid, and though they never smelled that good, this one's odour was particularly foul. She'd heard several yarns about what went into nuke-pacs: leftover experiments from hi-sec labs, for one. She flushed it down the dispose and detoxed her hands with two scalding vape-blasts from the module's steriliser tank. She felt unclean and hungry still, but that wasn't unusual. It would take a lifetime away from the Crawl to shake those feelings off.

Today was going to be a bad day; storm warnings were already sounding out there, so she'd have to dig out her heavy gear. She hated wearing the atmos-suit. It smelled of age and the connections left her feeling like she was licking copper connectors all day. She struggled into the suit, feeling it pinch in places. She stopped herself as she was about to step into the airlock for decompress. How could she go to

work like this, after what had happened?

Breda must think she'd run away mid-shift.

But then, if that was true, why hadn't she been dropped?

She shouldn't still be here yet she was.

None of it made sense.

Allah, she thought, goes to show how much we're conditioned. Something like this happens to me, and I'm thinking of going to work like nothing's changed.

The hub-car pulled up and began waiting its allotted min-and-half time before departure. Commuters pushed and shoved their way onboard. She watched them go, feeling an ache to be with them – a yearning, heedless desire, to not be here at the heart of a strangeness she couldn't explain. A question demanded her attention: *what on the Crawl are you doing? Standing here, watching, waiting, not going to work?*

There were deadlines today that would be missed. A pod sitting empty in the Compound. Breda would see. That pod would no longer be hers by tomorrow morning. She was volunteering to become a zero right now, whatever happened yesterday was no longer important.

Celeste got onboard the hub-car.

She felt like she was being watched by her fellow commuters, despite everyone being anonymous and near-blind in the bulky atmos-suits.

Would you like to update status?

She ignored the CrawlSpace message, though this did not stop the cursor blinking away testily at the edge of her vision.

*

When she arrived at the Compound, Celeste made her way to her pod on third level. Everyone else was wired in and busy chasing. She was the last one to begin prep for the day. There was no sign of Breda. The supervisor's cropped rust-copper hair couldn't be seen on its usual patrol between the pod rows.

Someone else was coming down the nearest row towards her: Simran. Celeste felt her skin crawl as the v-born HR drone approached. She'd call security for sure. *"Get this illegal out of here. She's to be dropped. No more pod-work for her."*

Her thoughts were too cluttered and jumbled up to focus. Her mind wouldn't empty and smooth out as she needed it to.

"Walker," Simran said, nodding acknowledgment. The v-born wasn't dressed in the rainbow fibe-suit today. She was in management black with hair pulled back tight into a ponytail. Even her lips were tinted with black gloss. A whole new look.

“What happened to Breda?” Celeste asked. It was all she could think of to say.

Simran blinked a couple of times; vat-born brains processed slow sometimes. “Moved on. The senior co-ordinator decided it was time for new blood. I’ve been promoed up from HR.”

‘Moved on’ was one of many synonyms for being zeroed and dropped. What could Breda have done to deserve such a fate? Celeste’s feelings for the woman were few, but still she wondered. Breda had been a stickler for punctuality, record-keeping, and ticking all boxes when it came to organisational minutiae. She couldn’t imagine Breda being a transgressor – and it wasn’t usual for someone to get what they deserved in the Crawl. That wasn’t how life worked. Simran hadn’t moved on, though. Instead, she leaned into the pod and whispered, “I know you were late in. We received the report when you didn’t update status on CrawlSpace.” She paused. “But that’s okay, I have a proposition for you. Hold out your hand.”

Celeste did as she was told.

Simran put something in Celeste’s hand discreetly, smiled, and walked away.

Celeste looked at what had been handed to her. It was a hi-sec access-strip – for Simran’s module. She’d heard about offers like this being made to subordinates but never thought it’d happen to her, especially as she was almost five past the thirty-five.

Celeste looked after Simran, askance.

Simran looked back at her. “See you later. Have a good shift.”

This shouldn’t be happening. She had to go to a wipe-clinic after shift, not Simran’s module. Something was deeply wrong with her. Perception. Recognition. Comprehension. All must be fried. Seeing herself as someone else. Losing memory of returning to her module. The voice on the unconnected telephone. Whatever happened yesterday in that trace was deep anomaly, and she needed to get it fixed. Bad code could be eating up her brain and wasting her soulwire down to nothing. But she couldn’t do timeout to go to the clinic right now. She was on shift and had to work, bad code on the brain or not. She couldn’t duck out on Simran’s invitation though. And, if she didn’t risk a wipe-clinic, she could be dead on her comp-couch come the next morn.

Fuck-fuck-fuck!

Celeste tried to clear her mind and get into the right headspace for a chase. After what happened yesterday, she didn’t need another negative experience.

She connected and dived into the Flood.

*

A flicker of light followed by tones bled from metal stung her eyes. The smell of ozone made her nostrils sore. This was not where she was meant to be; there'd been no sense of upload. She'd not even sought out a trace. No sign of the Flood's web visualisation anywhere. She'd gone direct to this, whatever it was. *Something corrupt inside me*, she thought. *I'm lost – being swallowed and rewritten by bad code.*

Her body felt dead and numb. She squinted into the shadows that surrounded her. They were occupied. More than one presence there, yet all were part of one another. When they moved, they made soft sounds. They were tall, whoever they were, and their eyes had no pupils and glowed like neon bulbs. Loose folds of wrinkled surgical robes undulated in the gloom. Their fingers felt like they had no bones when they caressed her. The metal surface she was laid out upon could have been a mortuary slab. It was cold, and they were cold. There seemed no end to the cold and the dark here.

Celeste could think and breathe – that was all. She could see no core to this trace, no personality imprint making itself known. These men were shades imagined, conducting a behaviour sequence yet there was nothing here to guide them. This was wild. Total rogue data. The memory-aspects of the trace could not govern how it played out because there was nothing here. No intelligence. Dead space.

I am lost. I've become one with the core of a trace. I'm adrift in the Flood. I'll never leave until another chaser finds and defuses me. And then I'll be dead. Gone. It could take weeks, months, years for that to happen. It could've been done already. For me, it will always seem like now. No real time passes in a trace. It's memory after all and memories never change; they just degrade over time. Photographs of photographs of photographs, retaking themselves each time we relive them until there's only blurs, shapes, and shadows left to be seen.

Uncaring fingers pinched and plied at her.

… there's no place like home… there's no place like home…

The words were a series of dead syllables ringing inside her brain, achieving nothing. Disconnect was down. There was no offline here. She was stuck in this trace.

A light was descending, bright and intense. She could feel its heat on the skin of her forehead, burning away flesh, cutting through to the bone. Her mouth made the shape of a scream, and a tear crept out of a paralysed eye. It hurt *so* much. It cut through bone until her skull was open. Pain became greyness resonating off walls she couldn't see.

… no place… no place… no place like home…

Their fingers were examining the wound made by the light. They talked about it, as something descended that was not of the light. It glistened and wept. It looked like a length of machine-tubing, but writhed with the strength of life. Their fingers guided it until it was

touching the wound made in her forehead, closing soft, perished lips over it without a sound. It suckled at the blood gathering in the sawn hole. She felt a tongue-like protrusion passing over the folds of her brain, stroking its furrows, delicately exploring, deeply intruding. A shiver reached down to her frozen toes. *No more. Please, no more. No deeper, please no more.*

A tension was building in the thing. Growing. Fluctuating. Fluidic engines churned, shuddering into life. A hush fell among the surgeons. The wan light in their bulbous eyes went out, one by one, leaving her alone with the weeping machine. A screed of violence pierced her to the core, making her spine arch harshly away from the metal slab beneath. The tongue thrust in through her skull and penetrated deep into her cortex. Watery sediment ran out and down into her eyes. It stung and smelled of long-dead minerals. It tasted of raw salt and bitumen.

The tongue went limp and slack after its discharge. The weeping machine withdrew, receding back from whence it came. Sensation returned to her. Feeling. Her fingers twitched. Her toes grasped at the air. She could feel the hole in her head and knew the tongue had put something in there. Something living. A seed.

*

Celeste opened her eyes.

She disconnected from the Flood. Tentatively, she probed her forehead for signs of a wound. Nothing – of course, there was nothing. That trace was real nasty. Proper full-blown horrorshow. No real harm done, maybe, but something was going on. Bad traces escalating, and they were all finding her. Homing in. Like someone was directing them. That couldn't be true though, could it? That was FakeNews talk. OpinionEd thinking.

First, the party. Then, the restaurant where everyone died. Now, this crazy nightmare shit.

What's happening to me? The end-shift siren sounded. Celeste had never felt more grateful to be leaving her pod and the Compound behind. There was a taste at the back of her throat. Old copper. Blood. It told her she probably wouldn't be coming back here again, and she believed it.

Why?

Because blood never lies.

Chapter Ten

Celeste caught a hub-car to one of the grav-elevators. These 'vators only went to and from the hi-secs. If you lived up there, you had no need to use hub-cars and do the dirty-long commute. They were guarded by laser grids and military drones. The only way into one without being fried was to have an access strip.

Celeste kept an eye on the commuters around her as the hub-car murmured along. She had a feeling of being watched, a creepy-crawl in the skin that wouldn't depart even when she scratched at it. There was something she'd forgotten. A break in the pattern. A mem-lapse. She couldn't put her finger on it. She sighed and cycled through music streams on CrawlSpace to gain some distract, but it all sounded the same to her. Her forehead ached, and she rubbed at it with a forefinger.

The hub-car came to a halt at the 'vator platform. She disembarked.

Celeste joined the end of a patient queue of hi-seccers. She could see the tell-tale signs of their superiority over mid-seccers like herself. Most of them smelled good, like they cleaned themselves every morning with real water, rather than chemical vape. Some had mods that were expensive and frowned upon in the mid-secs: precious metal eye-tints, off-world jewellery studs, and decorative skin grafts that mimicked animal hide. She wondered how many had designer organ implants as well, and other improvements that couldn't be seen in public. Their fibe-suits were immaculate; probably came with nano-cleaning tech. Most of them wore management black. She kept her eyes ahead, feeling small, different, and out of place with her dirt-brown fibe-suit and her malfunctioning mood hair, which was currently broadcasting a low-level rasp of 'tween-channel interference.

A few were looking her way – she was sure – but they said nothing. No-one could get in a 'vator without correct access. There was nothing to fear. The routine would go on. It would overcome all errors and glitches. There would be no disrupt, only synergy and continuity and due process. The queue moved slower than slow, small groups boarding the 'vator at intervals. The rest left waiting for the next time. This was nothing like a hub-car, where everyone jammed in and the only way to separate yourself into own-space was to activate an overlay and disconnect.

The last person ahead of Celeste boarded, and the doors slid closed with oiled silence as she found herself at the front of the queue. The military drone's eyes were blinking chips of sodium light. She fed the access-strip into the scan-point by the 'vator's entrance and

waited. The drone exuded a strong odour of stale sweat and over-ripe pheromones. She could hear it making low, impotent growls in the root of its throat. A bio-construct designed for a war that never came forced to spend its life-cycle as a glorified doorman. It was either perverse justice or a sick joke: she wasn't sure which.

The long moment of quiet that followed made her wonder whether she'd been given a dud strip. Was this some twisted prank by Simran? The v-born was young, after all; they were all hatched young, never old. She'd heard tales about hi-sec young and what they did to unwary mid-seccers: capture, torture, rape, murder. Lo-sec, mid-sec, hi-sec: each a level above the other with those below seen as less than human, less than animal, less than real.

They can do as they like with us, and we have to take it. Last Moments was a well-popular channel. Always on overshare, in close-up, what happened when you stopped watching your own back and someone got to you. She looked around to see if there was a cam-drone humming nearby, semi-hidden by the clouded air. The queue of hi-seccers sighed and muttered at her back.

The scan-point chimed and spat out the access-strip. She took it with shaking fingers. All was well. No incinerating blast from the laser grid system. She walked past the drone, holding the strip like a warding talisman.

The door to the 'vator opened. Unlike the pressure-vators, the interior was pristine. It rose effortlessly once activated. She would barely have realised she was moving at all if she hadn't watched, through a narrow, plas-steel aperture that ran from floor to ceiling, the passage up through the Crawl's multitudinous levels.

She was not alone in the 'vator. A man who must've boarded at a lower level stood by her side. There was room for two or three people in here. She was glad of the little bit of space between them. In her periphery, the man seemed to fade out, becoming indistinct like old, flickering film.

Celeste was aching to ask, *Are you real?*

But she went on staring dead ahead. To question would be a form of admission. It would concede she'd done something outside boundaries, that she had bad code inside her. There would be feedback units in a hi-sec 'vator. If she said anything, it would be recorded and she could face the consequences.

A hand, old and heavily-wrinkled, closed over her shoulder and squeezed so that she could feel the strength in it: augmented, more than human. It was a gesture that felt… familiar. There was *déjà vu* in it. Some latent trace-crud being activated?

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"It would seem to me that we are bound together, you and I," he

said, “and there will be no severing of this bond until one of us is kind enough to cut the cord.”

“Who are you?”

“The man in the moon sends his regards.”

Allah! She’d heard that name before. Old rumours. CrawlSpace talk. The architect – the man who designed the Flood and built the Crawl. His data-ghost was still around, undeleted, so it was said.

“You’re not real,” she said.

“Who is anymore?” he replied.

The hand released her shoulder. Celeste turned, but the man was no longer there. Gone – as if he’d vaped right out of existence. She didn’t feel the ’vator halt. She was notified by an oil-smooth, masculine voice, “You have reached your destination. Please disembark. Good night. Have a pleasant sleep.”

The doors shunted open, and Celeste stepped out onto a hi-sec platform. It gleamed like polished obsidian in steady light cast by fixtures made to resemble old-fashioned Victorian street lamps. The air was clearer here, and the modules were all well maintained. Footsteps cracked on the surface of the platform up ahead. The retreating back of a man dressed all in black was vaguely illuminated for a second – then gone. Near where he’d been, another ’vator’s door *shush*ed closed. Celeste stared at where the man in black had been.

Couldn’t be the man from the ’vator, could he? No.

That’d been a projection, a holograph. Some glitch set up to spook people. All he’d said was her name, and identity was an open secret in the Crawl. A trick, a prank best forgotten – that was the best way to think about it – except he’d mentioned the man in the moon.

Could he be real and true?

That was a question for another night. She had an appointment to keep if she didn’t want to be zeroed and dropped by morning.

There were no blocs here, as far as she could see, only strips of modules organised along connecting platforms with mechanised sidewalks to take you the short distance from one level to another. Fewer people. More space. No need to clump up. She’d heard that some hi-seccers owned more than one module and had them rebuilt into something that resembled old-time houses. Bigly own-space. The dream of every Crawl-born.

She was trespassing where she did not belong.

Celeste did not want to do this, but had to. ‘No’ was a disallowed concept. Acceptance was due and expected.

Still, she thought of asking Simran afterwards if there were wipe-clinics in the hi-secs. Wipe-clinic surgeons were unlisted. They worked in no Compound and answered no buzz-calls from modules. They were people of the digital dark, living in null-space. Using wipe-clinics

was illegal for chasers. The risk of being injected with poison code that could corrupt the Flood and create wild traces was yuge. It was a danger to the self and mind as well – but it was the only option she had.

Celeste read off the module number and designation from the access strip: *2X4B-523P*.

She found Simran's module after following directions that ran up her periphery, streamed in through her soulwire. There was no getting lost in the Crawl, only misaligned, and never for long. Celeste slid the access-strip into the module's entry-port. It chimed, and she stepped into the airlock. Inside, as the pressure adjusted, a female voice said, *"Please undress and await completion of decontamination sequence. Your co-operation is appreciated."*

Once her fibe-suit and boots were to one side, a golden holograph presented her with a robe, which she put on. It felt like real silk, but it couldn't be. She'd never felt any true Real before. She was relying on Flood-memory of how it might feel. Couldn't be sure. Either way, it was better than the fibe-suit. It also felt good to be out of her over-tight boots.

"Thank you for your patience. Decontamination sequence is complete. You are clean. Enjoy your evening"

The airlock's inner door opened, and she stepped into Simran's module. *Faux*-wood panels lined the walls and a holo-fire flickered away in the construct of a traditional hearth. Two luxury comp-couches were aligned in the centre, recliners with mood-texture by the look of it. Celeste estimated the module's contents equalled five years of her current share. The atmos-generator must be super hi-tec as well. There was no unpleasant smell of human habitation, rather a filtered odour that simulated flowers on a summer day in a world where there were no more summer days.

"It's mood-atmos," Simran said from behind her. "A prototype. I got lucky. It works wonderful-good with the mood-couches."

"You were a companion, then?" Celeste asked, more bluntly than she should have. The sight of a HR drone living like this bypassed her courtesy filter.

Simran coloured and nodded. "Before HR, yes. I did well."

"What changed?"

"My… provider died. He had no family. He left me his share rating. I was all he had."

"You must've been good to him."

"Kinder than the n-borns in his life ever were," Simran said.

"Sorry," Celeste said. "I'm just not used to all this. It's almost too much."

Simran's tone softened as she slid into companion mode. "Never

mind. It's the past, and I asked you here because I like you. Here, try some wine."

She picked up two tall, thin-stemmed wine glasses. Celeste took one between thumb and forefinger. The rose-coloured liquid inside smelled good, an aroma of apples and honey.

"Is this real wine?"

Simran nodded. "I only have a little to spare, but this is a special occasion." She raised her glass and chinked it against Celeste's. "To us." She smiled.

"To us," Celeste said, more muted.

Simran didn't seem to notice her reticence.

Companion mode must override detection of negative mood-shifts.

"Lie down on the couch and we can get started." Simran gestured. "This is only the beginning of the night I have planned." She disrobed and lay down on one of the two couches. Celeste did the same on the parallel one, but slowly and uneasily, looking around, expecting a cam-drone to materialise from behind an ether-field at any moment. This could still be a deception. A trap. There were no guarantees.

As she reclined on the couch, the mood-atmos changed. The definable odour vanished, replaced by a light scent that caught at the back of her throat.

Something chemical. Airborne pheromone-stim to create sex-mood, she guessed.

"I have a private connection," Simran told her. "My provider's. It will all be very discrete. No channel-hoppers, no data-spies allowed. We can do as we please, and no-one need know of your indiscretion this morning."

At least she admitted Celeste's late arrival was an excuse for the rendezvous, although how much of that was true and how much programming, she wasn't sure. Companions were designed to please, which made honesty difficult for them.

Simran handed Celeste a pink filament-cube. She held one between her neat, perfect teeth for a second before biting down. Celeste heard the crunch of it being ground down to sweet dust. She did the same with hers. The taste dislodged all lingering flavour from the wine. The rush from the cube started to make her pores sing. Her forehead ached and pounded. Celeste touched the nodule under her earlobe, letting the soulwire do the rest, reaching out for contact with the private connection.

Simran didn't do the physical, it seemed. She was a touch-voyeur: that much was clear from the couches. She wanted Celeste, but not in a basic sex way. Celeste wondered whether too much sweat and fluid would ruin the expensive shim-polish on Simran's skin. Those things cost by the square inch. Or, whether she was hardwired to do the

physical only with her provider and she'd not found a hack for it. Perhaps she wasn't willing to risk the change it could trigger. Granted, she could also have loved her provider true and not want to touch another and thereby sully his memory. It was known that v-borns could be that way. They were sentimental creatures.

The Flood surged in, as it always did, and Celeste's ruminations were lost in the purge of sensation as she connected. This was going to be a deep and powerful trip.

A very different part of the Flood to what she was used to came into focus. It burned with an amber underglow – a personalised overlay that must've cost yuge sheckles. From the electro-static flow-feel, Celeste could tell it was hi-qual. There was an aftertaste to it she couldn't deny. Tears prickled at the corners of her eyes as she struggled to absorb its crystalline perfection. This was above overlay, beyond trace. This was better than life.

And there was Simran; carved from fluctuating patterns of code shifting between ice blue, saturation green, and midnight red. She writhed like a snake across a black silicon beach that ran on into infinity, bordered by rushing waves of subspace-foam.

Simran opened herself up to Celeste's binary-code tongue and unreal touch as a lotus flower might, spilling streams of data-fluid. She made sounds of pleasure from a far-away meta-space, and their lovemaking resounded deep in the under-void of the Flood.

For Celeste, the experience still felt weird, cold and hollow – time and space without friction. Everything slid along as oil over water: separate and together, never mixing, never becoming one. This was how Simran saw herself and wished to be it seemed: untouched by the world. A fantasy of nonfulfillment. No-one in the Crawl survived untouched, yet she wanted to see whether it was possible. Was this desire, or v-born malfunction?

Celeste wasn't sure, as they contorted their bodies into sub-routines that triggered a multiple orgasm feedback loop. It was like coming up for air and then hanging there – suspended with the sun in your eyes, the burning sensation building and flowing, building and flowing, again and again, until the body could not go on and collapsed, utterly spent.

Too much. Way, way too much. Over. Done. Enough.

Celeste disconnected, slick with sweat, feeling well-drained and unsteady. She could've stayed in there interminably, letting the loop send her body into overdrive, but she knew there were limits for flesh and blood. Life was not the Flood. A stream of silver-pixel info flickered before her eyes. It was the data-read of their time together: an itemised breakdown of adrenaline spent and hormonal shifts processed.

It had been good – better than good – but now that she was fully conscious again, unease returned to the pit of her stomach. Simran was still on the couch. She hadn't disconnected. Was she still looped in?

Celeste approached Simran, noticing the glazed shine to her eyes. The v-born's body was trembling hard, caught up in orgasm, but shaking far too violently.

Something was wrong.

She held her hand to the v-born's mouth and nose. No longer breathing. She checked for a heartbeat. Pulse was there as a weak thread, barely working its way through the body. Almost gone. Simran was trapped, unable to stop the loop and pull out. Blood and saliva were bubbling from her lips. The heartbeat stopped.

Celeste punched a stim-pac code into the mood-couch's dispenser. Ripping out the plasticised patch, she placed it over Simran's heart. It activated, jolting Simran's body. Vital signs jumped up, spiking high, then fell away to nothing and did not return. Something had gotten into her and done this. Locked her in and killed her outright: poison code.

My bad code, Celeste thought. *I should never've come here.*

The mood-atmos generated the image of a marmalade cat, which walked out of the ether to coil around her ankles. It'd sensed her distress and was trying to comfort her. A prickling sensation, attempting to mimic the sensation of real fur, passed across her skin. She placed her hand against the blurred boundaries of the image, closed her eyes, and imagined the vibrations she could feel were animal purrs.

Celeste had heard yarns about live animals surviving in the hi-secs. There were none below. When she was little, she'd had a bio-bird: a shrunken, vat-born thing that lost all its orange-red chest feathers and darker plumage after one year and was found shrivelled up on the bottom of its cage after two. It'd been based on an extinct wintertime bird – the robin.

She remembered taking it out onto the bloc platform and letting it go, watching the small, fragile body freefall down through the grey-brown clouds that interlaced the Crawl's network. She wondered how long it fell for, whether it ever reached ground level. She wished for its last moments to be at one with the earth – did it ever make it?

Do any of us?

Celeste threw the half-empty wine bottle at the cat, making it pixelate and disperse with a yowl. The bottle sprayed some of its contents across the module floor, then rolled away to thump in the far corner. She threw herself down on the floor and glared up at the pre-fabricated ceiling.

Letting out a deep breath to stop tears from coming, she let the pain nettle inside her breast. This was no time for a breakdown.

Celeste got up and padded to Simran's bather cubicle, where she rummaged for a minute before digging out a strip of capsules. She broke the plastic seals with a thumbnail and counted out four pale egg-shapes, letting them rest in the palm of her hand. After considering them, she swallowed them down without water. They tasted bitter as morning, but the aching in her forehead eased up a little. She needed the pep from the pills. She'd had no compression time. She didn't want to go into the Flood again with this bad code in her head. It was the middle of night-cycle, but she had to go to a wipe-clinic – *right now*.

Searching for one on CrawlSpace would be reported, but she had to do it. She looked over at Simran. A thick line of bloodied drool was running from the v-born's mouth. That was her future, unless she did something quick. She had to do this, before anyone else got hurt – but that didn't stop the cold feeling gathering in her gut at what she was about to do.

Tonight, she'd been higher than she'd ever been in her life, and now she was going to go lower than she'd ever gone before.

Chapter Eleven

The wipe-clinic was not a salubrious place. It smelled of stale urine and late-night vomit. The clinic foyer was a dingy module with failing lights and a secondary airlock that opened into the operating cubicles. The nurse-program flickered into existence, out-of-focus and scrambled with green-yellow noise. “Please take a seat, Miss. One of the surgeons will see you shortly.”

Celeste sat down on one of the cracked plastic seats and looked around at her fellow patients. She recognised porn-junkies from the way they twitched. Hands unstill and eyes glazed over, staring into a broken inner space they dreaded and dreamed of.

One man had a face decorated by cuts that looked self-inflicted, and bite-marks studded his forearms. Ugly scabs had formed over the wounds. His eyeballs were tattooed night-green with magenta capillary work: an aesthete-punk who’d overdone it with mood-inducer, by the look of things. Something bought through Flood-connect and delivered by infected tubule direct into his body. He was lucky he hadn’t ripped his own throat out.

The last one was a frail-looking teenage boy sitting away from the rest, arms wrapped around himself, as if he were cold. A woman with a face cut from stone sat next to him: mother and son. The boy must be a creative, a thinker. They never did well for long. This might be his first time out of module; most children didn’t leave until working age. Before then, the CIs recommended total immersion in the Flood until age five, then alternate periods for adjustment to Crawl-life, until they could start work at age fifteen. That meant a lot of years spent in a small box with at least two other people. It drilled in conformity and left little room for individuality, let alone for alternative thought patterns to grow or flourish.

This one must be developing in some way though. So, Mom was bringing him to the wipe-clinic to start over from scratch. Removing bad code was one thing, but removing complete organic thought processes was another. Mom was doing the best for him, but Celeste knew the boy wouldn’t be able to remember his own name, how to speak, or how to shit by the time he left the clinic. He’d never work Compound. He’d be a vegetable until they gave him a sleep-stim overdose to end it all. Mom must truly love her son, bigly much. What a future awaited him.

The nurse-program’s stuttering face materialised before Celeste. “Which service do you require? Standard or deluxe?”

“Standard.”

“This way. Please follow–*follow* me.”

Celeste got to her feet and followed the free-roaming holo-face, watching as its ageing light-bee darted about inside to maintain the image as best it could.

"Standard cubicle thirteen-nine please." The holo-nurse crackled.

The cubicle cycled halfway open, jammed, shook, then finished opening.

Celeste looked inside saw a gurney with heavy-duty straps and clamps mounted onto a rust-flecked frame – a real old-time relic. Scuff-marks and gouges on the cubicle walls recorded past struggles. Spatters of a dried copper shade were everywhere.

"I think there's been a mistake."

The yarns she'd heard about the clinics were true. This place was for butchery, not surgery. There was someone big standing behind her.

"No mistake, Miss Walker."

A needle punctured her neck, injecting a silky coolness that numbed her brain and introduced her to a black silence deeper than any administered by a comp-couch.

*

Celeste awoke strapped to the gurney. Shapes moved around her. Her head was fuzzy. Her tongue was heavy and her throat too dry and tight to scream. They appeared human, although they were dressed in dirty whites and their eyes shone bright. Men in surgical coats wearing goggles and facemasks. Like the nightmare trace. The one where something had been put inside her.

"We know about Simran, Miss Walker. A shame. It was not part of the plan. Let's see what we can do for you."

"How do you know about her?"

"You have been watched."

"The man in the moon. Is he real?"

"As real as you are, as I am."

Celeste turned her head and saw several preservation jars on a shelving unit. Inside each was something tuberous, paste-grey and unsightly serpentine. Capillary-wires trailed in the amniotic fluid, hanging from loose vestigial skin that had developed over each growth. Duller, harder shapes could be seen embedded in the translucent semi-flesh: trace cybernetic elements.

Celeste realised what she was looking at. These were soulwires; naked and exposed to the outside world as they so rarely were. There were no official images, nascent or mature. To circulate them by public channel would get you zeroed in an instant – and she could see

why. To think everyone on the Crawl had something like this nesting inside them since birth: enhanced cancers designed to supposedly enhance life itself.

What have we done to ourselves?

"Are we locked down?" the surgeon asked.

One of his compatriots nodded. A light flashed on overhead, a low-hanging halogen bulb suspended on a strip of old wiring. It illuminated the cubicle's dingy, blood-spattered interior. She could've done without it.

"Now, let's have a look at you." The surgeon pushed a narco-patch into Celeste's neck, below her jawline. "A little something to make things easier."

She felt sensation draining away from her extremities. Everything went technicolour and widescreen before narrowing down to a zero point. She heard the surgeon's voice as an echo working its way across the lifeless distance of infinite space, "Now then, Celeste Walker, who are you?"

She struggled to get words out over the dead weight of her tongue. "What d'you mean?"

"You are someone. You have a name. Tell me what it is. We need to know."

"Celeste Walker."

"No, that's not your name. It's a story, a fiction wrapped around a ghost. I want to get to know the real you. Who you really are."

A flicker of light. The feeling of needles being forcibly pushed under fragile epidermal layers. Celeste tasted something bitter and narcotic on her tongue. "What did you give me?"

"A cocktail of hallucinogen and paralytic. It'll take you places. Wherever we need to go until we find the real you. Once we've done that, we can get you fixed."

"Fixed?"

"We put something in you a while ago but it seems to have gone a bit wrong. You know what I mean? Do you remember?"

The seed.

"We will find you. We know you're in there." The surgeon said.

Light was descending, bright and intense. It was touching her, finding its way in through the wound in her forehead that was and was not there. It was searching for the most elusive and damning of all things: the truth. She felt rather than heard the surgeon's last words before she passed out. "We know the revolution is here and we want to burn it out of you."

Chapter Twelve

Whenever she thought of Mom, it was more of the word than a person.

Each time, all it brought to mind was a woman with a lightly lined face and ragged hair, laughing on a sunny day under a clear blue sky. There were no more sunny days or clear blue skies, except as overlays. Mom felt like an edited memory, a commercial break to ease the mind, rather than someone who'd actually happened. But she must've existed for Celeste to remember her. *Or am I that far gone? Have I ingested so many traces that I can't even remember who I am or where I come from?*

She was on a hill and there was parkland rolling away in every direction, broken only by copses, trees and bramble-bushes. In the distance, red mountains reared up in dark, crenellated folds. The sun shone under a flawless sky, and she was sitting on a gingham picnic blanket with a basket of ham, cheese, apples, and oranges within hand's reach. Her fingers were sticky from the grapes she'd eaten, and there was an odour of burnt ozone in the air.

Mom was there, standing on the hill, but she wasn't smiling. She was standing still, gazing out at the mountains. Celeste took an orange from the basket and began to peel it clumsily. When she'd finished and looked up again, the sky was growing dark around the faraway peaks. It wasn't clouds. It was a darkness unlike night spreading out from behind them. No stars nested in it, and there was no sign of the moon. Celeste chewed on a slice of orange, got to her feet, and toddled over to Mom. She reached up and Mom took her hand. Mom smiled down at her, though it wasn't the smile from the memory-edit. This was a sad smile, one that felt real. A happy smile can always be faked. "What's wrong, Mom?"

Mom looked back towards the growing darkness and the unnamed colours growing in its wake as it spread across the sky. "There's a storm coming, Celeste," she said. "A very bad one. We should get away from here."

There's no place like home.

She picked up the picnic basket, and Celeste tried to help her roll up the blanket. They walked down the hill, away from the darkness, as birds began to fall from the sky. They passed animals – rabbits and foxes – lying still in the grass. Their eyes were blind glass marbles, and Celeste knew they were all dead.

"Mom, what's happened to the animals?"

"It's the storm, sweetheart. That's why we've got to stay ahead of it. If we're caught up in it, we'll be dead too. We must hurry."

As they ran, Celeste could see the colours of the world becoming those of a bad data transfer: corrupted yellow, degraded pink, and hazes of noise passed by like uncomfortable ghosts. Beyond the hill were trees – a small wood – and Mom led her in there, where all was silent. Hiding from shadows among shadows. How close the storm was, whether it was overhead or not, Celeste could no longer tell. The rustling in the trees could've been disturbed leaves or the ambient distortion of raw feedback. Mom had stopped running, so she stopped too. The way ahead was blocked. And there was a smell: petrochemical and metal-sour, an odour that didn't belong in a small wood.

"Mom, what is it?"

"Nothing, precious. You wait here for me. Don't move. Don't go anywhere. I'll come back for you."

"Don't go, Mom. It's dark. I can't see right. I don't know where to go. I don't like it."

"I know. No-one does. That's life. Wait and be patient. For me. Wait for me, my love."

Mom's hand was no longer in her own.

She'd waited. She'd been patient.

Mom hadn't come back for her.

She'd been left in the dark, abandoned, alone.

I've never been to a park. I've never seen real trees. Never been lost in them. How can that be my last memory of her? Which traces and extracted elements came together to compose this?

It was a question she couldn't answer. The traces were defused, gone, lost, dead. The next night, she'd probably dreamed a completely different life-story for herself. Perhaps she would have a father, or brothers and sisters. Then again, she might be an orphan or a rogue v-born.

Yesterday and today are different and the same. Memories come and go. Some are ours, and some not. The feeling that we have them is the only constancy. Every day, we try to remember something and find it's not there, and our store gets emptier as life goes on. No wonder we made the Flood. All those free-floating pieces of other lives to latch onto and steal, so we could feel more whole and not notice how many holes there were in our own lives.

She closed her eyes and thought of Dad.

He came to her distinct: a dark-faced, bespectacled man with receding tightly curled hair. She remembered him as thin, quiet and kind, but also angry underneath it all – not at her, or at Mom, but at the world they were a part of. He hated the Crawl. He wanted it to come to an end. He worked, but never said what he was working on. It was just his work. The secrecy of it had intrigued young Celeste.

One night, she'd dialled down her comp-couch so she didn't sleep and could see what he did. He was going into the Flood after everyone was asleep. When she asked him, he said that he was trying to wake up the Crawl. That even though it was a machine – many machines – it was alive in its own way, just sleeping. It needed someone to wake it up, but he was afraid that he was too old and not strong enough to do it. She remembered him placing his hands on her shoulders and saying solemnly, "The revolution is in you, Celeste."

Then, they came and took him away.

She remembered crying when the men in black fibe-suits took him out onto the platform and pushed him into a hub-car she'd never seen before or since; it was a quarter the size of the usual hub-car, gleaming under the surrounding light pollution, and its windows were tinted black so she couldn't see inside. See what happened to her Dad. That day, she learned the word *opaque* for the first time, even though that day never actually happened.

She never heard from this Dad again. She wasn't sure what happened to the Mom that went with this Dad either. She'd dreamed three different versions of what came next. Mom bringing different men back to the module and sleeping with them while Celeste dialled her couch all the way up, so as not to hear what they were up to. Mom walking out of the module one day and never coming back. Mom being killed in a pressure-elevator accident, crushed to death.

Real memory was in there somewhere, but Celeste had not been able to work out where it was. The deeper she dug, the more it hurt, like picking away at scabs with dirty, broken fingernails. A life lost, and a family imagined – such was the way of things when you'd been a chaser for so long. The Real was no longer real. Your hopes and dreams were multiple choice.

She remembered familial designations, rather than names. She wasn't even sure she remembered their faces correctly. Too many faces were on offer, all lo-quality. None to choose from. She remembered waking up one morning and being alone. There were people who should've been there but weren't. There was space around her that should've been occupied but was vacant. She missed them, had been alone since they left, and was unsure how to stop being alone. So there it was – her life and history: a vague sense of loss with a memory of abandonment that was itself a hollow shell. It'd been so long since she'd brought the truth to mind, it had rotted away inside her. So many other lives had passed through her they'd wiped the last traces of who she was clean away. There was nothing left.

All she had was her name. Celeste Walker.

I am Celeste Walker.

Please. Don't let them take that away from me too.

*

"Nothing. There's nothing here. Just bits and pieces. It's been obliterated. There's no point in going on with this."

The light was extinguished. The surgeon removed the face-mask and goggles, showing her face to Celeste. Underlit gloom revealed the girl she kept on seeing: the one from the drop, the one in the trace. Wherever she went, this Grace followed.

"Who are you?" Celeste demanded. "Why do this to me? Make me remember I'm nothing, a nobody walking around in alien skin? *Who are you?*"

Grace merely smiled down at her, "I'm sorry. I don't think we've met."

Sensation was burning through Celeste. Painful, brutal sensation. The need to do something about what'd been done to her. And something more than that: how could this Grace not remember her?

You are nothing to me.

They'd taken the straps off while she'd been unconscious. That'd been a mistake.

Celeste threw herself at Grace. She threw her back against the cubicle's wall. Grace's skull cracked hard against the carbon surface, and she slumped to the floor, leaving an ugly smear of red behind. Her face rolled to the side and Celeste watched the girl's features degrade, leaving behind a pale, blond man with bad teeth. No-one she knew.

"Shit."

She'd killed again. This time on purpose – or had she?

Celeste staggered over and kicked the body. She made contact with metal, hurting her toes. Peeling back the man's med-tunic, she found the torso beneath was a poly-alloy shell. She pulled at the face, and it came away in her hands, along with the hair, leaving a droid-skull of reinforced steel behind. Its mouth was set in a hideous leer. The red smear on the wall was discharge from the processing unit in the cranium. It'd smashed open on impact. Not Grace. Not a man. A programmed surgeon. Layer over layer over layer. Nothing was constant. Everything was in flux, changing and changing. Fluid and moving like the Flood. *The wheels on the bus go round and round – but what happens when they come off?*

"People die," Celeste whispered to herself.

The lighting in the cubicle winked out. All she could see was fragmented after-images reflected off the grinning teeth of the droid's head.

Stop laughing at me.

She could hear voices shouting outside, echo chasing echo back and forth in all directions.

The door to the cubicle cycled open.
Disoriented, she stumbled out into the dark and started to run.

Chapter Thirteen

Celeste wondered how much time she'd lost and how deep she was. The Crawl's buried interior spaces – where the wipe-clinics resided – were populated only by gloom and neon ambience filtered in from the outside. She passed along platforms where hub-cars hung like rusted ruins. Nothing passed this way anymore. Holes gaped where numerous modules had once been. All dropped. All zeroed. All gone. It was all depleted this far down. It meant something, but she didn't want to know what. This was too deep for her, far too deep. The surviving modules were empty, abandoned wrecks. When she looked into one of them, she saw a child sitting alone, watching an empty screen. The child looked up and held her in place with its saltwater gaze. "You need to be careful," the child said, "the man in the moon is watching, always watching down us here."

Celeste walked on quickly, before the child could say more.

She passed stacks piled high with remnants of the old: VHS video recorders and cathode-ray tube television sets – not a single one in working order, all little more than preserved shells. She was surrounded on all sides by monuments to the past.

This stuff was legacy. It was where everything had started: the Crawl, the Flood, soulwires. Without the cathode ray tube, none of this would be here. Television, the very first overlay. Light viewing. The big reality-escape, which went on and on growing until the escape became better than reality. The revolution was lost then, and people took over their own oppression. Self-regulation began, and the road to the future was laid open. She went over and touched one of the television screens. It felt warm rather than cold, was clean, smooth and gave off a slight *frisson* of static as if it'd been switched on recently. Strange.

Just because something is old, should you throw it away?

Should we stop loving it because it's broken-down?

No, she thought, *we just leave things to rot, inside or out, and try to forget they exist.*

The television set burst into life.

Celeste stared at her own face.

"Have you been having bad dreams lately?" it asked.

Celeste said nothing.

"I'll take that as a yes," her electric self said. "How long?"

"I'm five past the thirty-five, so you work it out," Celeste snapped, bitterly.

"You've seen, thought, felt, and touched more of human consciousness than most people in all the secs, you know that, right?"

“I’m good at my job, that’s all.”

“Everyone has a universe of possibilities inside them, Celeste Walker. Most never know it, never see it, come close to feeling it because of the way the Crawl is, how life and work here grinds everyone down until we can’t even see what we’re achieving day-by-day.”

“I defuse traces, that’s all. It’s routine maintenance, like rep-droids and tidy-bots. We have to defuse them, otherwise the whole system would come crashing down.”

“Would it? Are you sure?”

I’m having an argument with myself. This is crazy.

“The Flood has to be regulated.”

“That’s what they say, but think… what do we really know? All we have are OpinionEd, FakeNews, SpeakPeace and a hundred-thousand other streams to choose from. We can’t work out shit for ourselves. The Crawl’s old is all we know, but how old? Have we been up here for a century, two, three, ten, twenty? How many generations have lived and died without knowing truth from lie, reality from dream?”

“So? That’s the way it is.”

“If that’s true, then what am I? Am I you? Who does that make you?”

“You’re trace-crud. Some residual shit from the wipe-clinic festering in my head.”

“The man in the moon is watching. You’ve become unregulated. Whatever they put in your head, that seed, has burned out. That doesn’t happen often with their tech. He knows what you are. Remember, the play’s the thing; wherein you’ll catch the conscience of the king. Be careful.”

The television set went dead.

Celeste put her hand on it again. This time, the screen was cold and her hand came away thick with dust. She looked around and saw a rathole dead ahead.

Good, she thought, *I need a fucking drink.*

Ratholes were something the CIs allowed to exist, although they were not approved; most were indicated by the sight of those who’d had too much to drink, slumping along the platforms. A typical rathole could occupy as many as four or five modules on a strip. This one was about that, Celeste guessed, as she went inside. Night-screens bolted to the walls were tuned to degraded porno-feeds with discordant old-time music playing in the background.

A fem-droid twisted and ground itself around a stained pole in one module, its synthetic skin long since rotted away, leaving the dulled metal of its chassis behind. It was missing its head, and one

arm below the elbow. That didn't bother the punters though. The droid had curves and feminine shape, that was all they needed. They watched, chewing mechanically on blacks and pinks, fingering the nodules underneath their earlobes, adjusting reality to their own particular fantasies about the droid grinding its cracked, leaking abdomen against the pole.

Celeste found her way to the bar and ordered a shot of bitterclear.

The barman was human up to the base of his neck. His head was a plas-steel skull with living eyes and real teeth embedded in it. Artificial lids flickered, lizard-like, over his eyes, keeping them moist.

Plasma storm victim, Celeste guessed. *Head burned away by a surge. Bought this as a housing for the brain, the eyes and the teeth. Poor bastard.*

Teeth endured. Somehow, they survived. Why else would so many bodies be identified by their dental records? With so little left, you'd want them if nothing else was salvageable.

The barman looked like he was smiling, but that was just the way his skull had been engineered. The eyes told another story: pain, no doubt dulled by as much bitterclear as he could imbibe. Best reason to work in a rathole was the constant, ready supply of painkiller.

Celeste swallowed the shot and coughed as it punched her hard in the stomach. She asked for another. Comp-couches were designed to clean and sober up individuals, among their many programs, but Celeste had no intention of returning to her module to sleep. She needed to decide what to do. Life in the mid-secs was so regulated she didn't know what happened next.

She was well outside parameters, boundary-less. There was a word for the way she was feeling, but she couldn't think of it – and a third shot of bitterclear didn't bring it to mind. There was nowhere to run. Her share would be stopped, wouldn't it? There would be no shelter for her in any module. She'd been involved in a manager's death, by accident, and another death at the wipe-clinic, or a droid's termination, at least. The blood she'd tasted in her mouth back at the Compound; it'd been theirs.

Gusts of stratospheric wind blustered by outside. Patrons sprawled over the neon-lit surface of the bar, which hadn't been wiped down in a long time. On the screens behind the bar, the latest Deathball game was in progress. Electric motorcycles tore around the spherical uni-wall of the motordrome, better known as the murdersphere, chasing the studded, lead-cored deathball guided by the lead player. The lead player started the game in possession, but rarely kept it to the end of the thirty-minute period. To be player one was a death sentence, which was why all competitors were criminals.

After five minutes, the first screams ingrained themselves into your consciousness. After fifteen minutes, the murdersphere would be

slick with blood. Booby-traps, such as fire-pits and spike-snares, were everywhere. Every player was armed with long-handled, stainless steel scoops that resembled *lacrosse* sticks. The scoops were for ferrying the deathball once acquired, and for murderizing competing players. After thirty minutes, there would be a winner – or not. Sometimes, the only survivor was the deathball, rolling itself slowly around the gore-spattered murdersphere. It was the most entertaining means of executing the unwanted, and every channel fought viciously for coverage rights.

Celeste had never been much of a fan. She ordered another shot of bitterclear, downing it, shakily, in one and closing her eyes against the carnage being *whoop-whoop-whoop*ed by the onstream audience. Those seated around her in the rathole were no better as they cheered on the unlucky sods fighting for their lives.

'Yeah, do it. Go on. Slicer-dice that sumbitch!'

'*Fair dinkum, fuck 'em up, boys! Holla-holla! Mur-der-rize! Mur-der-rize!'*

'Blood on the ice, man. Check-it-out! Shit-ton of hot blood already all over the mutha-fuckin iiiiiice!'

Some poor fucker's head erupted across one of the screens. Strike one. Another player down. Number five. Red ran down the screen, greeted by whistles and whoops from the bar's crowd. Celeste had to get away. She left her seat and the bloodied screens behind.

Beyond the bar were cubicles with locked doors – private rooms for those that wanted them. Some had clear plexi-glass walls so the wares inside could be advertised – men and women for your good shares. One of the women looked appealing; long blonde hair, not quite platinum, and a thin red dress that'd seen better days. She went up to the glass and placed her hand against it. The woman inside matched the gesture. She could see the studded implant-lines around the woman's eyes, tightening the skin to make her appear younger. Stardust glistened on her cheekbones to heighten the effect.

She would do.

Celeste held her wrist up to the scanner-pad by the door. It chirped and flashed green. Seemed like her shares were still good, for the time being. The door cycled open. She went inside. There were plastic-cushioned couches and a circular platform in the centre with a stripper pole rising out of it. The light under the platform was broken. The woman was waiting for her; cross-legged and tired-eyed. "What d'you want then?"

Celeste shrugged.

The woman raised her eyebrows, "Standard show do you good?"

"Sure, whatever." Celeste said.

"Great. I love an enthusiastic punter."

The woman stripped the red dress off functionally and began to slowly turn and spin around the pole. Her body showed her age more than her face. Every gesture was drawn-out and mechanical. There was less life in her performance than the headless droid outside. After a while, Celeste said, “Stop.”

The woman stopped.

“Come over here. Sit down.”

The woman did so without a smile, “Are we gonna talk? You know there’s no special discount for that.”

“I know. Answer a question for me.”

“Yeah?”

“Are you real?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Celeste ran her fingers down the woman’s cheek. The flesh felt warm and the bone underneath was hard. “Can you remember your parents? Are you v-born? Droid stock?”

The woman frowned, “You looking to insult me now? I’m n-born. Pure blood.”

“No-one’s pure here.”

Celeste pinched the flesh of the woman’s other cheek between finger and thumb. It wasn’t a gentle gesture. She meant it to hurt. “Are you lying to me?”

The woman didn’t flinch at the pain, but Celeste could feel the tension growing in her. “If I cut your face off, would there be real bone underneath? Would I be looking at a grinning plas-steel skull? Or, nothing at all? Would I speak all my questions and only be answered by the howling void?”

Tears were running from the woman’s eyes. “Allah, you’re dusted. You can have your share back. Full refund. Serious. Whatever you want from me, I don’t want to give. Please. I want to wake up tomorrow and be breathing. Alive.”

“Don’t we all?” Celeste said.

She let the woman go.

“Get out,” the woman said, “leave me alone. Don’t come back. Clear?”

“Clear.”

Celeste left. She was feeling sick; hating herself for what she’d done. Someone who doesn’t flinch from pain has known too much.

And, the bitterclear in her stomach was fighting back. She needed a dispose-cube quick. She pushed her way towards the farthest section of the rathole, ricocheting from one regular to another. Her head was spinning like the deathball on the screens. Game Two of the night was underway. No less bloody than the one before. Groping her way along the nearest wall, she felt the surface give and open up into a dark,

secluded space. Dispose-cube or not, this would have to do. Celeste near-collapsed. Her knees banging hard against the flooring as she vomited even harder. It could've been minutes or hours before she came back to herself. Elastic time snapped back into place. She looked up and saw four men looking down at her.

Oh, shit.

She'd thrown up in a private room. One look told her these were all hi-seccers. Young ones. Rich. They had smiles on their faces that could've been painted on. Their eyes had been upgraded with fluorescence and the pupils were elongated, nocturnal slits. With their hair spiked and the studded faux-leather fibes they were wearing, she felt like she'd fallen into a den of night creatures. They were wearing masks she vaguely recognised. Old world names came to mind: Nixon, Hitler, Putin, and Trump. Despicable, cowardly men these spoilt children wished to emulate. One of them giggled, high-pitched and mean. Another shuffled his feet, the omega wolf cowering at the rear of the pack. One alpha led the others, neo-knives drawn. In the background, she could see a *bukake* porno playing on the worn-out vidscreen.

"She smells awful sick," said one.

"The better for us," said another.

"Put her down and get her naked. Grab her by the pussy. I want to put my knife in her, all the way inside," said the mean giggler wearing the Trump mask.

The alpha, in his Putin mask, was strong enough to pin a drunk woman to the ground. Struggling sent everything into violent spin. Celeste gagged on her own bile. The night creatures laughed. She spat in their faces. The lighting made their masked visages turn dark and ugly.

The brilliance of a neo-knife interrupted her vision. So close she could hear the buzzing of the element inside. "You spat in my eye," the alpha said, "I should take one of your eyes for that."

Celeste tried to move her legs to kick but she couldn't. The others were sitting on her; keeping her still while the alpha had his play. Leader of the pack went first. The others followed after. The neo-knife's light illuminated his teeth, which were too white and too clean. He leaned in and licked her face up and down with a prehensile tongue, an extra bought with parental shares. "You taste nice," he said. "Be sweet for me."

It was the last thing he said.

The world exploded.

Boom – boom

Hitler and Nixon disintegrated in a hot shower of blood and bone.

Boom – boom

A scream from Putin. A child's cry from Trump, followed by some whimpering. Hard substance cracked against flesh and bone. There was smoke and bitterness in the air. It stung her eyes. She blinked to clear them. Hands helped Celeste to her feet and she saw the barman with the plas-steel skull. He was holding a sawn-off shotgun under his arm. His permanent leer was a welcome sight. "You hurt?" he asked.

"No, shaken, that's all." Celeste said.

He led her gently out of the private room.

"What about them?" she asked, "won't family come looking?"

He shrugged. "I'll dump the bodies. It's not the first time. A friend will cut out their soulwires and sell them on black market. No-one's anyone without their soulwire. They'll be little more than dead meat once they're found and I doubt their parents will mourn long. Hi-seccers love their share best, after all."

Celeste looked around. No-one seemed disturbed. They were watching the game. The volume way up, must've helped to hide the gunshots. She sat down at the bar; conscious of her dishevelment and the vomit clinging to her clothes though she looked and smelled no worse than the regulars.

"Buy you a drink?"

Celeste smiled her thanks to the barman. He didn't return the smile – impossible with his engineered grin. He poured and set down two shots before her; one red, one blue.

"See one you like?" he asked.

Celeste considered them for a moment.

She downed both in quick succession. No sipping here.

"Compliments of the man in the moon."

Celeste looked at the bar man with an effort. "What?"

Her head was getting heavy, and he was blurring, becoming indistinct. His skull grew rounder, whiter, and the shimmering bottles behind him glowed like stars in a night sky she'd never seen. The noise from the screens and the hubbub of the regulars became a strident, ululating choir. His mouth opened to encompass everything, opening wide, wide enough to swallow her down into the void. *"Time to wake up, Celeste Walker. Remember, there's no place like home."*

Chapter Fourteen

Mickey Mouse was ringing again.

Groggily, Celeste groped for the cheap plastic receiver and picked it up.

"There's no place like home," said the voice on the other end.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"If this is real, then it doesn't make a difference. But you could be in deep, Celeste Walker. Tread light. Tread careful. Say the words out loud, and see for yourself."

Celeste put the phone down.

She sat down, breathed, and then said the words. "There's no place like home… no place like home…"

No glitch. No degradation that she could see. No sign or sense of disconnect.

This was Real.

She was back in her module.

Should've stayed sober, she thought.

A vibration passed through her surroundings. She shouldn't be here.

Celeste dressed quickly, in a fresh fibe-suit, and punched her airlock's exit code.

The airlock wouldn't let her out.

Now they had her, they would drop her. It was over.

The shutters lowered, darkening the space. Her module was going into lockdown. Another tremor. She hurried to look outside. There were the red lights, blinking away, and she could feel the servos trembling as they shook off rust and crud that'd built up over decades of inactivity.

Celeste Walker had become a zero.

The hub-car was idling at the platform. Her *hub*-car. The one she always caught and would never catch again. The 8:31. She could see the faces of the commuters inside watching as she'd watched so many times before. Pity. Fear. Sorrow. Despair. The faces were masks carved by silence from these four emotions.

Her module disconnected and went into freefall.

Celeste could feel it, creaking and grinding against the infrastructure of the Crawl. The vibrations became so intense she thought the module would be ripped apart by the stress. Her own screams matched with those of the straining cube that'd always been her home.

The module came to a stop.

She sat on the floor, surrounded by the fallen and broken pieces

of her existence, listening to metal, carbon and plasticised elements settle. Celeste looked out through a porthole to see what was there. Down here, in the lo-secs, everything was one bloc. There was little to no space between. Wires, cables and tubes hung in dense umbilical clumps, feeding whatever was needed into the modules. She could hook into the Flood and stay there, along with the rest of the people here, living out the rest of her lifespan in a perma-bliss state.

So much for being a revolution.

She was trapped, the same way everyone before her had been. Through the portholes in her module she could look in on the four that adjoined her own. Each contained an occupant wired in by numerous cables and IV connectors that delivered the required nutrients and proteins. Their eyes were glazed over. They saw only whatever heaven-state the Flood was generating for them. They'd never leave this place. Not even when every surface was slick with excrescence, and they were reduced to dull mounds of coarsened meat barely illuminated by failing lights. Obese. Past the point of incapacity. Fused with their surroundings. At one with the Crawl.

A lot became clear in the dark. The zeroes were core-code, renewed generation after generation as people in the mid-secs were dropped. The system was rigged. This was why they worked so hard, slept so little, and burned out. The lo-secs were neither a threat nor a punishment; they were every mid-seccers' future, one way or another. The Crawl was being optimised. Natural-born was time-consuming. It was a waste of resources to support indefinitely. The decision had been made, somewhere, that old-fashioned humanity's time was up. Rendered obsolete. V-born were more efficient, harder working, less prone to breakdown and decay, and eventually, disposable. A v-born's life was twenty-five years. The same material could be recycled and refreshed as a new v-born after being cleaned of memory in the tanks. There'd be no n-borns left.

How many are left? Celeste wondered. *How many are still natural-born?*

And, am I one of them?

She didn't know. Couldn't answer herself.

With the CIs access to the Flood, it was not a difficult to think how they could easily implant memories from everything floating around in there as they pleased. Chasers did what they did, but she was sure it hardly made a dent in the amount of free-format data available to be manipulated. V-borns were generated from the tanks mature, post-adolescent. No years of incubation necessary. They'd never know whether they were born that way or not with the right memory-feed to simulate an early life. But efficiency couldn't be the whole story. There must be another reason for this cycle of existence.

There was no such thing as perpetual motion; this was not sustainable indefinitely. The cycle must have been put in place with an end in mind.

She sat there, stubbornly letting the hours tick by, listening to the sounds the Crawl made this deep. She was in its guts. Here was artificial life's age. Here was rust. Here was loss and decrepitude. The deposit pipe hummed into life as a nuke-pac was fed through. The console on her comp-couch chimed and spat out a glistening strip of blacks. Food, and narcotic oblivion – how very tempting.

Celeste was able to ignore both – until her stomach stopped rumbling and began to ache too painfully to bear. She swallowed the nuke-pac's processed contents in a series of short gulps. Then she munched the entire strip of blacks and dry-swallowed the granular mash they made in her mouth.

The connect hit her powerful strong. She left her body and the Crawl behind; far, far behind. She chased herself out through hyperspace, plummeting through wormholes, stargates and galaxies before she came to rest on another world. Three moons hung suspended over a delicate cascade of stars that looked completely alien to her eyes. A bruise-blue nebula dominated the vista, along with a triad of moons – one small, obloid and dirt-grey, caught between its larger turquoise-amethyst brethren. She was barefoot in bone-white sand, but when she dug down a little with her toes, she found layers that shimmered black and dark blue underneath.

Celeste turned, and turned again on the spot, taking in all that was around her. The desert was flat, stretching on in most directions without being broken up. To the south-east of where she stood was a collection of incongruous dome-like structures.

Whatever passed for civilisation, or its remnants here, she thought.

Looking up again at the stars concentrated into a cascade, she guessed that she must be on the fringes of some distant galaxy, nowhere close to the Milky Way. Celeste walked towards the settlement, still high off the buzz of the blacks. She felt no trepidation or concern as she wandered through a night-shrouded landscape that dared not even breathe. The light from the moons was as strong as a sun, painting her surroundings in melancholy shades.

The structures became clearer as she came closer. Swirling alien sigils were worked into the clay domes, no doubt by hand. The broad sweeps and pitted marks of the sigils made her imagine their makers with super-long, thick, multi-knuckled fingers. She held up her own hands and spread her fingers wide. Looking down, she did the same with her toes, splaying them in the sand.

Will I be a goddess here, she wondered, *with my tiny fingers and toes?*

She couldn't resist laughing at the idea.

It was the first sound she'd made since arriving, and there was something strange in how it travelled around her, moving like a free-roaming spirit that dissipated somewhere in the distance. The domes were taller than she was, and they seemed to be simple dwellings. The people had to be primitive folk. Celeste saw no sign of them, though.

Each dome had a low, circular opening at its highest point. She'd assumed they were chimneys but, walking around first one dome and then another, she surmised these must be doors for the people who lived here. There was no opening at ground level.

Reaching up, she felt along the rim of one of the sigils with her fingertips, and then tried her weight on one of the lower depressions, balancing on her toes. They were not decorations at all; these were ladders, in and out.

Celeste climbed, taking it carefully until she reached the top of the dome. There was the opening to the interior. She hung back from it, unsure why. The hi-buzz was wearing thin, like a song dying away. She wasn't certain she wanted to look, to see what was there.

This's what happens when you do too many blacks at once.

Something could be in the dome: a trigger for this trip to go bad. All she had to do was look, to set eyes on it, and things would start to collapse around her.

From her vantage point, Celeste looked around, following the shifting desert out to the mild curve of its horizon. This cluster of domes, this sign of life, was alone out here in the wilderness, utterly isolated. There was a cold, disturbing beauty in the emptiness around her.

Strange that after almost forty years as part of the Crawl's infrastructure – physically, psychologically, and spiritually – she should feel some kinship with this state of being. *Is this what happens to the soul when it is exposed to too many people, too much constant noise and activity, too much life? Does any state become preferable, as long as one is alone?*

Celeste turned back to look at the opening, waiting like a mouth eager to either consume or vomit out blackness.

I have to look. There's no way I can't.

She crawled to the edge of the hole, leaned in, and looked down.

Celeste saw herself, bloodied and broken, side-by-side with a man she didn't know. He was made of black glass and scattered in a hundred pieces. His fine suit torn to shreds by the impact of the fall. *But where,* she thought, *where did we fall from? How high and how far?*

…all the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put back us together again…

Celeste took a deep breath – and came back to herself.

She was in her module, in the lo-secs.
There were tears in her eyes.
“Am I going to die down here?”

Chapter Fifteen

He missed her.

The man in the moon stood at her bedside and pressed his fingers to her lips. Micro-processed neurons fired in his brain and his teeth ground against each other. He was trying to remember her name. The information wouldn't come. The data was rotten and bare. Too long since he'd last been down here to see her in repose. Had it been a century? Two?

The cryonic air coated his skin and suit with a layer of ice crystals as he rested the tips of two fingers against her paralysed lips, letting her know that he was still alive and looking after her.

Would she even know, or care for him, when she revived? She was old but preserved whereas he was ancient and had been rebuilt time after time. There was little of the original man left that was not embedded with circuitry or layered over by enhanced internal systems. Still, love was love, as much as he understood it. He'd made a commitment to her. To survive and forge the future ahead.

His eyes wandered steadily over the frozen woman – her hair was composed of fragile, white wisps – and wondered if the word love was his to use after all the numb years alone. Commitment was more an act of loyalty than love, closer to a contract. An agreement that he meant to see through. Contracts and agreements he understood. Love he did not, which must be why it had somehow managed to work upon him. He could feel the ghost of the grief he'd been wounded by rising to the surface again. It made him shiver. He did not like being vulnerable.

The woman who was the seed of their future had done this to him. The first sign of her growing strength. She'd managed to break down the implant they'd installed by unconscious will.

"She is almost ready," he said to the woman in the bed, "she will be coming to us soon."

He was not feeling love for the bedbound woman, rather remembering it. Scenes from their life together played over in his brain; mem-cordings downloaded from the hard drive inside his brain. *I felt love then*, he thought, *I made sure the memories were kept safe. Was it not the first part of myself I had upgraded? Yes, I wanted them preserved even while my body fell apart.*

The first time we met. Drinks in the Ty Warner Penthouse at the Four Seasons in New York. You, so beautiful and blonde in a red dress. Me, sober and grey in a suit. Good food. Champagne. He tried to remember other moments but the pieces were too diffuse and over-written from numerous data recovery crashes.

Her family had been wealthy but they were paupers compared to what he'd been able to offer. Old money versus new money. Her parents approved because he came from the right stock, had the right standing in society – but they never liked him. As a businessman he was cold, renowned for it. There'd been an affair with a secretary. After it was over, the girl cut her wrists in his office. He found her body the next morning and had it cleared away with the rest of the rubbish. His executive assistant made the call to the girl's family. The suicide and how he dealt with it cemented his position. It was very good for business, and bad for his relationship with his love's family. But he cared about business and her, not them, so it didn't matter too much.

How strange, he thought, that after all this time her parents should finally matter to him. Not because he cared but because of what he could not remember. Their names – they were lost too. Insignificant data but he wanted it all the same. He'd forgotten too much, become too empty.

She'd been a part of his life he'd been unable to quantify. Her presence defied the tenets that defined him. Love was a chemical imbalance in the brain caused by hormones and neuropeptides. War veterans returned from conflicts with damaged brain structures and associated emotional impairment knew this. He'd considered love to be the same form of damage yet the feeling persisted in him when she was around. She was a part of him. Indivisible. A future without her was not worthwhile, that's why she was here, why he became the man in the moon.

For her, the future had to be perfect.

And still, he couldn't remember her name.

Chapter Sixteen

Celeste heard a voice. It was young and bright with life, out of place in the machine-born gloom she'd wrapped herself in after her space-trip on blacks.

"*Heia*. You're new. Just been dropped?"

Celeste turned in the direction of the question, but the voice seemed to be coming from all around.

"Who're you?"

"You looking for a welcome to the lo-secs? Others not responding so well?"

"Not real good, no. Who are you? What's your name?"

"I'm me. You can call me Grace."

A holo-face resolved into clarity before Celeste.

"How're you able to do that down here?"

"Because I've been down here long enough to know how," Grace said. "Not much else to do down here but learn up. I didn't dig staying high on nothing but sex dreams and buzz highs."

"You're young to be down here."

"My folks got dropped when I was an under-five. They died. Dull and wiped out on the Flood, like the rest of the zeroes."

Celeste said nothing. Under five, in this hell. That was grim.

"So, why'd you come looking for me?"

"I always say hi to new zeroes. Most ignore me. Think I'm a Flood glitch or something. You're the first one to ask who I am."

"You could be a glitch. I've seen you before."

"You have? Where?"

Celeste gestured upwards.

"You're joking me. I wasn't born that high."

"I've seen you three times now, and each time you've not been who I thought you were. You could be an overlay with a rogue identity trace."

"Sorry, Celeste Walker. I'm real."

"How'd you know my name?"

"I told you, I've been down here long enough to know things."

This time the voice had a direction to it. It was right behind her. Celeste turned around and found herself looking at Grace in the flesh. There was no degradation this time. She was real.

"How'd you get in here?"

It was Grace's turn to point upwards. The vent hatch in the ceiling of the module was open.

"You came in quiet."

"You gotta be, down here," Grace said. "We're not alone."

"What do you mean?"

"Roaches. They're all over. Waiting for life signs to dip, and then they swarm in, harvest our meat for the CIs. Return to base and feed it back into the Crawl."

"Feed it back in? What for?"

"Nuke-pacs. Proto-matter for the v-borns." Grace shrugged. "Could be either or both or neither or something else. I don't know where it goes exactly. I see the leftovers gushing down the pipes. You wanna see a Roach? They're well nasty." She tapped at the neon-braille on a wristband she was wearing.

A nightmare cut from glass and obsidian lunged out of the tepid air at Celeste. It was too close to avoid; its claws sank into her – and passed straight through, as if she wasn't there, or it wasn't. It existed somewhere between a spider and a cockroach, with two intensely glowing red LED eyes. It moved smooth and slick as feedback flow.

"That's a Roach?"

"Yeah, well nasty bastards. They come out during night-cycle, mostly, but you need to keep an eye out. When life signs go down, they'll be there. Faster than death. Come on, enough gas spent on this, you've got places to be."

"I do? There's nothing down here."

"What you know. Not what I know." Grace said with a smile. She bounded back up into the vent that led out of the module.

"But what about these other people?"

"Someone, not me, picks and chooses who gets invited. Even then, some who get asked don't come. Why deal with the real when you can spend the rest of your life jacking off in your favourite sex-dreams, right? Still, you been picked, and you look like you're choosing to come, so get a hurry on." Grace reached down.

Celeste took her hand and let herself be hauled up and out of the module, leaving behind the meagre remnants of her life.

"What was that?" Grace asked.

Celeste knelt, peering back down into the module. Mickey Mouse was ringing again. She watched his one working LED eye flicker plaintively at her. After a few more moments passed, it went black and he went silent.

"Nothing to worry about," Celeste said, "show me the yellow brick road."

"*Mon plaisir*," Grace replied.

*

The ventways were tight, long and narrow. Grace explained they

circulated basic air-recyc between the modules, doubling as maintenance hatches – and a way in for Roaches when someone's corpse had to be collected.

Something shifted nearby, in the dark.

Celeste froze. "Thought you said they only come when life signs fade."

"They do. And you've left your module – counts as death to them. You're easy meat now."

"You didn't tell me that before."

"Would you have come out if I had?"

Celeste said nothing in response.

"Exactly." Grace whispered. "No going back now, for you or me."

They went on; Grace in the lead with Celeste coming after her, crawling on hands and knees through the network that wound around the zeroed modules like an intricate representation of the Flood's countless threads, channels and streams. It was grimy, cold, and slow-going. The slightest sound echoed for miles, always answered by the sound of a distant scratching and scuttling. At those moments, Grace would stop and so would Celeste – then, they would wait. Wait and hold their breath as Roaches spread out, scanned and probed. Always out of sight, but you could hear them clear. They glimpsed flickering red eyes on the search. Heard the internal chatter of scan-sequences; the talk of so many insects. The odour of partially-digested offal grew thicker and more fragrant the deeper they went into the network. In places the stench intensified and, below, Celeste could see they were passing over areas where colossal vats rested, full of oozing matter dumped in from the mouths of numerous pipes. "That's where they all end up," Grace said, "the zeroes. The ones who don't come with me like you did."

"So that's where we all go in the end. Not exactly heaven is it?"

"Sugar, proteins, and amino acids. Primordial soup. It's what's leftover. We end as we began," Grace said.

A metallic screech jolted them out of their reverie.

"Don't they ever rest?" Celeste asked.

"No. They're incapable of it, until they catch their targets. We're rogue meat, outside modules. That makes us target." Grace paused. "Be still. Don't breathe."

Ahead, Celeste could see a Roach blocking their path.

"Stay quiet. They're big on movement."

Seconds ticked by as Celeste held her breath. Eventually, the Roach chirruped icily – an all-clear signal to its compatriots – and moved off down another ventway.

The two companions moved along again, taking it easy, taking it careful.

There, something else up ahead. Laboured breathing. Awkward, broken sounds of bodily movement. It was a man, prone and badly injured.

"Allah, what happened to him?" Celeste whispered.

Grace looked the man over. He was wounded, looked as if he'd gotten himself caught in something big with teeth. Flesh and muscle were shredded down to fibre in places. His legs were a ruin that would never walk again. "Someone who got out without our help, by the look of things. You find 'em sometimes. No system is foolproof. There's a trick to tripping a system, and someone smart can find it without help. He must've crawled around for days, couldn't get back into a module."

They started to move past him.

A hand grasped Celeste by the wrist.

The man was alive.

His eyes flickered open. *"Help… help me… please… it hurts…"*

Fingers dug into her flesh like they were cast from steel. His eyes were crazed with alone-sickness. He needed her. Needed someone. Needed others so he could stop being lost on his own in the dark.

"Please… the Roaches'll find me again. They'll turn me into dispose this time. I've seen it… their jaws and claws… I don' wanna be paste…"

She looked at Grace. The young scavenger shook her head. "We'd have to drag him all the way. Go real slow. Too slow. The Roaches'd get us, all three. We'll all be paste then."

The man's fingers dug harder into Celeste's arm. *"Allah, please! Don't leave me. Stay till I die leastways."*

Grace shook her head emphatically. "Can't. We stay. We all die." She drew a length of moulded carbon from her belt and flicked her wrist. A shimmering blade of light extended from it: a neo-knife. "You let her go, or I finish you," Grace told him.

He mewled wetly and relinquished his grip, eyes streaming with tears. *"If you gotta go, jus' kill me… please… I don' wanna be paste…"*

Celeste glanced from the man to Grace and back again.

"Kill me, please!"

From not so far away, came a chorus of machine-cries.

"We gotta go," Grace said. "He's killed himself. Us too, if we don't move now."

Grace turned and went. Celeste looked after her. She looked back at the man for a moment. His mouth was working but no words were coming out; only moist, laboured breaths. She opened her mouth to say something, but didn't. She followed Grace, feeling sick and cold inside at what they'd done. She stopped and turned around – a mistake.

The Roaches were there, feasting. A violent convulsion tore

through the man. Blood spurted in a thick arc from his mouth, and he let out a gurgling cry. Something was inside him. Many things were. His body twisted sharply, this way and that, as viscera showered from fresh wounds. Celeste saw gore-slick metal writhing and thrashing in his remains. They were chewing the man up and spitting him out. Breaking his body down. Reducing him to paste.

The sound of bone and flesh being ground down to mush echoed in every direction.

A cybernetic insect head, trailing tubing and wires, reared out of the dead man's guts. It turned through one-hundred and eighty degrees until Celeste saw red LED eyes blinking inquisitively at her. She froze, sweating, until its gaze passed on. It hadn't registered her presence. Thank Allah.

"Too perfect," Grace said, at her side. "I should've seen it, should've known. Right in our path. He was a trap."

"How could he be?"

"Crippled like that. Sick and scared. Why chew on one when you can chew on three? If we'd helped him, that'd be us. Come on, we gotta to skid fast."

Grace grabbed Celeste by the wrist and pulled her along. A glance over her shoulder showed a tableau of raw bones and dripping, glistening claws. The Roaches were done with him – now they wanted the other two. In low crouches, Celeste and Grace scrambled ahead of the clicking black tide. Zig-zagging through the ventways with no plan or direction; only a faint hope of sanctuary driving them on.

"Need a module. We need a fucking module," Grace shouted. *"There!"*

She started to pound and kick her heels against the access-pad to a module. It remained stubbornly closed. "Knew I should've brought a cutter with me."

Her face turned to Celeste and it was a haunted, pale oval; the same she remembered from when the trace where they first met disintegrated. "You got anything?"

"Might do." Celeste said.

She pushed past Grace, placed her wrist against the module's reader-pad and touched the nodule beneath her earlobe. She closed her eyes, felt the faint orgasmic rush of Flood-contact pass through her, and thought – *open…*

A *shush* of decompressed atmos answered.

They were in.

It was Celeste's turn to take Grace by the wrist as she dragged her inside. Celeste operated the internal reader – *close…*

The Roaches hit the module like a wave of broken glass fragments. Incisors and mandibles *scrick-scracked* all over its outer

shell, but they couldn't get in. It was secure. Minutes ticked by. Grace's breath steadied. Celeste's heart-rate eased. And the murderous tide of predators gradually ebbed away.

They were safe. For now.

Chapter Seventeen

The module was a dank, desultory space. They stood in its airlock listening to one another breathe, feeling their own heartbeats, sweat cooling and drying on their skin. Feeling they were alive, not dead, not chewed up like the poor bastard in the ventways.

"Why didn't they come in after us?" Celeste asked.

"Conflict of subroutines I rec," Grace said. "Outside the modules, we're target. Inside is where we should be. Also, you jacked in so they must think we belong here."

"Piece of luck," Celeste said.

"I never seen that before though." Grace said. "How'd you do it?"

"Would you believe a knack?"

"*Nuppa.*"

Celeste shrugged, "Something happened to me in the mid-secs. I'm still not sure what exactly. But something inside me lets me… do things. Things that shouldn't be possible. Access to places. Stuff I've seen. I should be dead really. Not able to walk around and tell people about it."

"I believe that over knack." Grace said.

"What do we do now?"

"Wait a bit," Grace said, "'til the Roaches are well clear. They scan and purge in blocs so we should be able to leave here and be clear safe after a half-span or so."

"What to do with that half?"

"Have a look around?" Grace said with her bright smile.

Celeste operated the pad for the module's interior. The door cycled open.

Inside was dim and obscure, but lit by hundreds of small blinking lights.

"What're those?" Grace asked.

"Christmas tree lights. Old-time tradition." Celeste said.

Then, the smell hit them.

They saw a family; mother, father, and daughter. All wired in. Feed-tubes, catheters and bionetic thread-harnesses making them resemble flies caught in a colossal spider's web. Coloured light danced across three faces that were dry and wrinkled like perished apple-skin. Celeste reached out to touch the face of the little girl. The small face crumbled inward from being disturbed, exposing the hollow space beneath.

"All dead. All empty." Celeste said. "I thought everyone was cleaned up by the Roaches."

Grace shrugged, "Not everyone. There's always dodgy

connections. Some die when the feed-tubes and catheters are put together incorrect. No system's perfect. Some get missed, like these."

Celeste looked at the family mummified by time and dust. She put her fingertips against the smooth bone showing through the child's disintegrated face. It was so cool and lifeless. There were tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. She blinked them away. No time for that now.

"This is what it comes down to? You either die and get turned into soup by the Roaches or you get overlooked and die alone in a module. The future as a clerical error."

Grace frowned, not understanding.

"How much longer d'you think we should hang on in here?" Celeste asked.

The young scavenger whistled through her teeth. "I reckon the Roaches should be elsewhere enough now. They'll get assigned new targets and move on. Even if they pick us up again, we'll be at the bottom of their to-do list for a span or two."

"Let's hope it's a long list." Celeste said.

They made their way into the airlock, leaving the dead family behind. Before they departed, Celeste looked over her shoulder. One of the dead girl's eyes appeared to catch the light and move as if it were looking at her.

No, it was a cockroach crawling out of the hollow socket. All of the animals and birds were long gone but down here, among the almost-dead of the human race, these particular insects clung onto existence. Surviving. Proliferating. No wonder the scavenger-drones had been nicknamed Roaches. They're what's left behind when we die, to pick over our flesh and bones. Perhaps, they're all that'll be left of life one day.

Celeste followed Grace out of the module.

*

They crawled on through the ventways for hours, listening out for Roaches. They were undisturbed except by occasional crepitations in the infrastructure that Grace reassured her were normal; the rattling and banging of aged metal expanding and contracting as heat and cold levels altered throughout the lo-secs. Celeste was tired, sore and her muscles were very cramped when Grace signalled her to stop. They were in front of a vent covering like any other – like hundreds they'd passed before – so it seemed.

"Here we are," said her companion, finally. "Home sweet home."

Grace dislodged it with a series of adjustments using a screw-jack.

She dropped down and Celeste dropped down after her. They landed in a standard module by appearance, but something was different. It was empty and relatively clean for one thing. There was white light filtering underneath the airlock door. Grace punched in an access code and the door opened.

They stepped outside into what looked like an old-time marketplace. Smells other than those of production, cleansing, and pollution filled the air. Good smells, of food cooking. Celeste heard music being played on instruments, rather than the piped-in, perpetually positive, upbeat synthtrax that hummed on hub-cars and underplayed Crawl channel broadcasts. Here were sounds and sights and existence built around more than being happy, having to be happy, and earning your share from the Compound.

Grace gently closed Celeste's gaping mouth by lifting her chin up with an index finger.

A man approached them out of the crowd. He had thick white hair, a heavy brow and a thick, slumped torso. He was moving forward with purpose on broad legs, wearing a rumpled suit that shifted its shade as he walked, cycling through exotic, psychedelic patterns. His shoes were long-toed and decorated with crocodile-scale and silver-chain spurs that clicked on the flooring as he walked. He held out a hand weighed down by pewter rings and a gold-plate bracelet.

"Welcome to the Zero Sector, Celeste Walker," he said, "we've been expecting you."

Chapter Eighteen

"I'm the Perl," the man said, "the one and the only."

"The Perl?" Celeste repeated.

"Right first time. I look after things down here, away from the CIs. All I'm wearing is Real. I trade in Real. I speak in Real. I trust in Real, so you can trust the Perl, can't she, Grace?"

Grace nodded, but Celeste looked him over, still unsure. The Perl was unlike anyone in the mid-secs she'd ever seen. He was beautifully ugly and grotesquely tasteless. A part of her warmed to him, liked him even, but another part held back, uneasy.

"You look unsure," he said. "I get it. You need some Real inside you. Too much nuke-pac shit and crud residue still swimming around in your body system. You need to flush that crap out with some real food and pure booze."

"You have ratholes down here?"

The Perl laughed. "Ratholes… no, we don't call 'em that. Come with me."

He led them to a small corrugated shack where a man, about sixty, with dreadlocked hair and a beard reaching to the floor sat at a table fashioned from industrial metal sheeting. He looked up and flashed a smile at the Perl. The smile was made of teeth manufactured from bullet casings. "What you got here for me, Perl?"

"New one from the mids. Sign her up."

"Can do. Name?" he asked.

Celeste looked to Grace. Grace nodded.

"Celeste Walker."

"You got a wire?"

"Yes… doesn't everyone?"

"Not down here," the man smiled. She watched him take down a clipboard from a rack on the wall and scratch her name underneath a list of others.

"What's that?"

"List of folk," he said, "you're one of us now. You've joined the community. Welcome one to be one with the all."

"Thank you," she said, trying to sound convinced. "What was that you said about not everyone having a soulwire?"

"We can take it out of you. Simple."

"No, it's not. That could kill someone."

"And having it in you could kill you too." Perl replied.

Celeste wanted to say more but stopped herself.

I can't quite believe this.

"Careful there, Duke." The Perl said to the dreadlocked man,

“We’re blowing the young woman’s mind about our little world down here.”

“Sure looks like it.”

“Come on.” Perl gestured to Celeste and Grace, “let’s go get something to eat. You can worry about the technical stuff later.”

They followed him through the shack and out onto the other side.

Celeste was standing in a street, for want of a better word. On each side rose structures rickety and unsafe, none looking like the well-ordered strips and blocs of the sectors above. There were more shacks piled on top of one another, with frames of wood and recovered steel. The outer walls were constructed mostly from corrugated iron, plastic sheeting, and carbon-fibre shell fragments. Ladders and ropes ran up the sides of the structures like vines, connecting the individual domiciles and giving them a way to reach the floor safely.

There were scavenged modules built into the structures here and there. The airlock doors and reinforced glass removed so that decorative curtains could hang over the openings giving a sense of colour and life to the once-dull, conformist dwellings.

In places, single shacks broke up the maze of teetering towers. These shacks were an attempt to replicate old world styles with gabled roofs, traditional windows, and an open porch with steps leading up to the front door. The exteriors were washed in a variety of colours with patterns scrawled across them like wild, rampaging blossoms. Celeste saw windmills with ragged sails turning, somehow. The shells of old vehicles – buses, tanks, and trucks – had been gutted and turned into homes.

Everywhere she looked, something old, discarded, and abandoned had been given new meaning and purpose by the people here. Celeste could see faces glancing from windows and doorways; not out of suspicion but curiosity. Some smiled, even waved. In the streets, their children played, chased and fought each other with makeshift swords. The eyes of the children were bright and clear. Their smiles were true. They were without soulwires. She could tell from looking at them. She could feel it. They were people as people should be, not the worn-out shadows of the world above.

On their way through the streets, Grace handed Celeste a foil carton. She looked inside and saw whitish cubes piled in a rich brown broth.

“Reconstitute with gravy. Good flavour. Plenty of it. Much better than nuke-pacs,” Grace said.

Celeste tried it. It tasted good.

“What d’you think?” Grace asked, gesturing at the buildings of the zero-sec.

“It’s amazing. I’ve never seen anything like this before, except in traces.”

“Reach out and touch it. It’s real as real can be, like the Perl said.”

Celeste did. She felt wood grain and splinters under her fingertips. She caressed waxy tarpaulin and the abrasiveness of partially-rusted iron. The texture of paint and fake-brick veneer. It was true. It was Real. She had to blink against tears gathering in her eyes.

“Time for a beer,” declared the Perl.

They’d come to a street where the structures were not so high and the fronts were all open. Tables and chairs scattered themselves along the length of the street. Steam and fumes rose from chimneys, wide windows and serving hatches. Celeste let Grace lead her to a table as the Perl disappeared into the crowd. He returned with three dark brown bottles. Grace handed Celeste a bottle and took one for herself. It was ice-cold to the touch. Dazedly, she clinked the bottle against Grace’s.

“Try some,” Grace smiled, “It’ll give you a real buzz, not the thin, bitter kind you get from mid-sec crap.”

Celeste swallowed a mouthful from the bottle. Her face contorted for a second, and then she let out a breath. “It’s very good,” she said.

“Real beer,” Grace said. “Always hits the spot.”

“That’s the spirit, my ladies,” said Perl. “You gonna be all right down here.”

And Celeste was. There was filth and grime, but there was also laughter and the sound of voices not deadened by the constant beatings of procedural life. The lo-secs were not the end of the Crawl. There was a layer below called zero and it felt very much like a beginning rather than an end.

*

They drank into the small hours.

“What about soulwires?” Celeste asked, “you said they can be taken out.”

“We’ve got someone who can do that.” Perl said, “not sure you’re ready to meet him yet though. Trust the Perl.”

“Why’s that?”

“He takes some… getting used to.”

“But how does he do it? Remove the wire?”

“He’s got ways. That’s all you need to know.” Perl said, passing Celeste another beer.

Okay, I guess that question can wait ‘til tomorrow.

Besides, there were no comp-couches. No regulations. No strict day and night cycles. This was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. Analysis and understanding could go hang, better to enjoy the moment.

They talked. Plenty of talk about the Crawl: how it was built, and how it kept going. Old-time words were bantered around: Roswell, Area 51, Dyatlov Pass, the Black Knight Satellite. None were conclusive, all easy speak and rumours, because the truth was no-one knew for sure. The answers were in the hi-secs, and the moon. No-one from up there came to talk down below, so the yarns kept on spinning, theories fabricating and refabricating to no end. Celeste didn't think there was a simple answer or a complex conspiracy behind it. Once tech became advanced enough, it became the same as magic.

People had forgotten, that's all. Life on the Crawl dulled memories, and nothing old was preserved. There was no history outside of the working day. There was no thought that didn't originate in a pod, cubicle, module or compression couch. The old-time people had gotten the Crawl up on its legs and set it going, but that kind of knowledge, and memory of it, was long gone.

Except for – the man in the moon.

The moon came into view as an off-white disc through a shifting fog-cloud of data conjured by Grace from a toy holo-scanner. There it was. The last place where there might be history and thought.

"Can you get there?" Grace asked.

"I don't think so," Celeste said.

"Head in the sky," Perl said. "Always has been for one buried so deep under."

"You'll get there one day," Grace said.

"How'm I gonna manage that?" Celeste asked.

"Ingenuity."

Celeste raised her beer and chinked it against Grace's. "Sure. Ingenuity. We'll do it. Together."

"I'm serious. You will get there, and sooner than you think," Grace said. "I've seen it in my dreams. It's out from my reach. Most people, but not yours. You'll get there, someday."

Celeste didn't know what to say. She'd seen Grace so many times before coming here. Now, she was being told that she'd been dreamt of, or seen in the same way?

How much of me am I? How much of her is me? How many other people am I made up of? How many thoughts, memories, and dreams are behind my eyes? Who am I? And would there be anything left of me if someone took everything that's not me away?

They were questions she didn't know how to answer, so she drank

more beer.

After another hour of inhibitions steadily dropping away, Celeste and Grace kissed for the first time. It was much, much better than in the trace.

Real will do that to you.

Chapter Nineteen

Celeste watched Grace sleeping next to her. The heat of their love-making had long since cooled and the zero-sec atmos-plant had shut down for the night. She huddled under blankets and thermal-wraps with eyes closed until she realised that sleep was eluding her for reasons other than cold.

She dressed, teeth chattering, and, wearing a thermal-wrap like an overcoat, went for a walk around the sector. It was small compared to the above secs, all of which were an exercise in redundancy whereas the zero-sec was compact and unique. She was here with the few who'd been saved from the Roaches. Walking through the make-shift streets between the bivouac hovels, she saw lights hanging in the windows that hummed and buzzed with low wattage. There was a warmth here that did not exist above. A feeling of something. A word that felt old, antique and rusted, like something abandoned in the attic of human memory. The same word the man in the shack, Duke, had used – *community*. These people depended upon on another and could not hope to survive unless they worked together. Need was demand and demand was need.

"Up late, Walker?"

She turned around and saw the Perl sauntering towards her as if it were still the middle of the day.

"Different down here, isn't it?" he said, "everyone sleeping natural. No dope or comp-couches to help you into the arms of Morpheus."

"Old-time god of sleep, yeah?" Celeste said, a datum-fragment she'd picked up years ago.

"There's plenty of the old-time we could do with here. You see it and feel it, don't you? Not in your upstairs head but in your gut. The feeling of all these people together, helping one another out by choice. No Flood. No soulwires. No being forced together into the non-stop chitter-chatter everyday bullshit fucking mess."

"Nothing good comes of things being done by force."

"Good one, Walker. I like that. You're getting it. Starting to."

Celeste shook her head, "No, it's not that. It's more like I'm… remembering."

"Huh," he said, "I heard you were a special one. That there's something in you might help make things betterer than they are."

"I'm not so sure about that," she replied, "they put something in me. I thought it was a trace but now, I think it's a true memory coming through. I don't have many of those. Can't even remember my family, if they ever existed. Then again, maybe I'm a long-lived v-

born, who knows? It's possible."

"We got v-borns in the sec," Perl said, "nothing wrong with that. So, you're maybe not human? Jus' means you're another form of life like the droids and bots, like the animals there used to be below before we trashed the planet."

"But how do I know this is real and not another trace, Perl? I could be jacked in and rotting away somewhere, oblivious to the truth. I've only met you today and I feel like there's some trust there between us but is that real or some programmed data-shit?"

"You think too deep about it," the Perl said, "we're made and fabricated whatever level of real this is and we're stuck with it. Flood, trace, nightmare, nirvana, whatever. It doesn't matter, that's the thing you forget. Thing most people forget. However real this is or isn't, your expiration date is still due. Maybe we are these machines of meat and blood we imagine, maybe we're living dreams sound asleep. Point is, if you die by a bullet in the head or the trace you're trapped in being dissolved, would you ever know the difference between one and the other?"

"I guess not."

"It's how I see things because this is all we got. We're one sector against all of the above and we're not gonna last long. We might as well be a trace, trying to survive with chasers on our tail. I'm gonna die down here, Walker. Maybe tomorrow, day after, and the sec will get wiped out the same. It could be in ten years or a hundred but it'll come to an end eventually."

"Why?"

"Because the good shit never lasts."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Part of me maybe doesn't want to be, but I have to be because we're different here. Where you're from is the end of what was begun a long time ago. People wanting to go on and on and on forever. Eat healthy. Marry. Have the kids. Do the job. Get the mortgage. Invest in this. Profit from that. All supposed to be worth something, isn't it? All supposed to give you immortality. But there's none to be had anywhere, not even if you ground the universe down to dust and sifted through every last speck of it.

"We woke up one day and we started thinking too much. Simple. That's all there is to say about us. We die, we're over, done, and someone else comes along and takes over. Hell, something else will come along when we're all done and that's that. No more people. Every story should have its ending, Walker. Otherwise life becomes something that hurts too much and for no good reason. We know we end and we accept it better down here.

"Up there, they got everything made to keep them going. There's

no forever though, just a longer tomorrow, and that's the real revolution, baby. Know when it's all over. Accept it. Know when it's time to let things end." He paused to chew on the stump of his cigar and blew out a series of thick smoke-rings, "Who knows, Walker? I might not die. I might wake up tomorrow morn and this's all been a dream, a bad fugue. I'll have a wife and kids at my bedside or no-one at all. Yeah, probably not. Then, I'll be the Perl of someplace else. That'd be good 'cause everyplace needs to have a Perl, right?"

The big man put his hand on her shoulder. She remembered the man in the moon doing the same but this was different; a warm gesture rather than a cold one of control. "You're all right, Walker. Whatever happens, you remember the Perl said you're all right. Take that with you and show 'em what you can do."

With that, he walked away. It was getting colder out and it would be warmer in bed with Grace. She went back to the vagabond girl and joined her in unprogrammed slumber. For the first time in years, Celeste Walker went to sleep looking forward to the coming morn and what it might bring.

Chapter Twenty

The man in the moon watched the Earth below with the darkness of the Crawl spread across its surface. The neuroseed was down there among the maggots of humanity, not knowing how unique and special she was. She should have been registered earlier and brought to him but, as ever, there had been an error. The existence of the error was excusable. There was margin for it in the plan. All was not lost. However, he could not excuse those who allowed the error to occur. They'd had her, they'd dropped her and now, she was off-grid. There was no trace of her in the Flood or CrawlSpace. She had been disconnected somehow and that couldn't happen.

The Crawl, the Flood, and the soulwire had all been made to ensure this was impossible.

He accessed memory, remembering how it felt to hold the prototype soulwire in his hands. The feel of its lab-grown flesh, ice-cold and slick. It had been heavier than he expected, and it was the closest he'd ever get to feeling what it was like to hold a child of his own.

Under his supervision, advances in the experiential technology that created the Flood had gone hand-in-hand with the genetic engineering that led to the soulwire's birth. Global CI approval allowed him to proceed with unrestricted tests cloning the human organism until they reached a stage where mutation and degenerative disease could be accurately replicated under laboratory conditions. The world cancer crisis had been at its height. Perfect timing really. His science divisions turned life around overnight by reprogramming the tumours infesting humanity so they could exist symbiotically inside a host body. Careful tweaking of the chromosomal sequences controlled growth and kept the tumours in a relatively benign state. All curative research was cancelled when it became clear, thanks to him, that cancer could be thoroughly monetised.

Gene-engineers worked closely with technologists to enhance the tumours so they could be wired directly into the central nervous system, thereby creating an even deeper immersion experience in the Flood. The tumour implants became known as the soulwire and soon everyone on Earth would have one, even those who were not afflicted with cancer beforehand. Techniques were developed so that soulwires could be inserted into embryos *in utero* and v-borns had them included as a special feature of their bionetic wetware. After successful implantation and attachment to the brain stem, there was no going back. Any attempt to remove the tumour by surgery would trigger a failsafe rejection code. The tumours would be activated – initiating an

accelerated growth sequence that turned them malignant and terminal.

This fact was not kept secret.

The public were told the whole truth – and no-one protested.

Enhanced access to the Flood's reality-nullifying fantasies was considered worth the cost. Mass implantation went ahead across the globe. Life and death were in the hands of the CIs; ensuring continued compliance from humanity into the planned and itemised future that lay ahead.

However, he reflected, nature does love her anomalies. Pilot error and foetal distress were her calling cards. The traces were an unexpected afterbirth of the Flood and soulwire.

Human beings had become more interconnected, and strangely isolated, than ever before. Even on a subliminal level, they were jacked in twenty-four-seven. The first compression couches quieted the subconscious interference but they could not cut it out altogether.

We took them beyond casual disconnect; the switch; the flip-out. To be out would mean to remove the soulwire, and there was no authorisation for that. From birth unto death, one was to be part of an ever-listening, ever-present, overseeing network – and the traces were a necessary by-product. Preserved fragments of thoughts, dreams and memory cut loose yet trying to find their way home to a consciousness.

In a way, he thought, we created the first ghosts.

Chasers had to happen as a result.

In every human endeavour, moderation is required even if it is only for show. With the entire population hooked into the Flood and synchronised, societal roles were applied and set during childhood. Aptitude for divination of the Flood – with its undercurrents, binary storms, and erroneous streams – could be ascertained by the age of two. The traditional age of walking and talking also became the time of deciding one's future fate, indefinitely. In the same way that malware programs, firewalls and automated bots used to police the internet, so the chasers dived into the Flood to make it safe for citizens of the Crawl.

No-one thought there might be another purpose for the chasers but then, why would they?

Such knowledge was exclusive to him and his cryo-frozen kin. The realisation that traces might start to graft onto a particular consciousness. A form of mutation made possible by the Crawl, the Flood and soulwire combined. He had never been a religious man but the significance of this trinity did not escape him.

The neuroseed was the next stage; not merely evolution but *ascension*.

The key to making the imperfect future perfect.

There was no place for her in the filth below. The other mutants might spoil her.

That couldn't be allowed to happen.

"I must take action," he whispered. It'd been a long time since he'd done such a thing. Centuries spent watching and waiting and, all of a sudden, he was running out of time.

How ironic.

It was time to become involved.

He reached out with his mind and traced the individuals needed. The shock of being in contact with him, the architect of their existence, almost made the little Crawlers lose their minds. They would never look upon the face of god but, tonight, they would hear his voice. This comparison pleased the man in the moon.

He told them what to do.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Someone wants to meet you, Walker," Perl said.

It was early. Grace was still snoring gently beside her. Celeste crawled out of her bunk and squinted in the low light of an artificial pre-morning. "Who wants to meet me?"

"Someone," Perl said. "Tell you when we get there."

He led her to a repurposed module nestled in the outskirts of the zero-sec. No-one lived in the shacks that adjoined it. It was quiet out here and darker, away from the farthest bulbs of the lighting rig. "He doesn't need much light to see," Perl said.

"Okay," Celeste said, not sure where this was going.

"Here." Perl reached out and knocked on the module's airlock. A long, slow pause. It opened with a greasy hiss of decompression. The air inside smelled of animal leavings and unwashed hair.

Celeste shook her head. "I'm not going in there."

"You are," said Perl. "No wants to see you."

"Who?"

"No name to him, so we call him No." He paused, and then shouted, "No, you got the guest you wanted."

There was a shuffling and hissing.

Perl took Celeste by the hand and tried to lead her inside. She pulled away. He sighed. "No, you're gonna have to come out more. She's not budging much for you."

The hissing resolved into ragged breathing.

"S'okay, No. Lights are down low. Bulbs went out hereabouts yesterday. I asked 'em not to fix. Day cycle won't hurt your eyes when it kicks in."

The inner door of the airlock opened.

A tall figure squatted on the other side, in the dark, arms clasped over its head, looking like it was in pain. Its skin was grey and there was not a trace of hair on its smooth, naked flesh. The arms gradually unfolded from around the head.

"You be careful, Walker," Perl said, readying himself to leave.

"Why'd you bring me here to leave me?" she asked. "Is this thing safe?"

"No-one's safe around No. Because he's No, and you don't say no to No. He'll have questions for you. Give smart answers and you'll be okay. Trust the Perl. I gotta go."

Celeste watched him leave, wishing she could go with him. She turned her attention back to the strange, nude creature. When Perl's departure was complete, No lowered his arms completely, revealing himself. His face was angular and long with heavy brows and an

elongated nose. Like the nose and shape of his face, his ears were long and rectangular. His lips protruded in a thin, ridged pout and he had a prognathous jaw. Blunt depressions were carved where his eyes should have been. He was born blind. There was nothing comely about him and an odour hung between them that made Celeste think of empty underground vaults, time, dust, and the unburied dead.

As if to mock him and the life he might've had, No was blessed, or cursed, with broad, well-formed genitalia that swung heavily as he shuffled towards Celeste. His long-fingered hands were outstretched, groping the air as if it were something tangible. She backed away. He took her hands in his own, despite her protests, and spoke. His voice was soft, gentle. Old man wise. "Welcome home, Celeste Walker."

"This isn't my home."

"It could be, though it will not be."

"Fine. Why do they call you No?"

"Because it was the first word I learned. The first sound made when eyes were laid upon me. My mother's first word to me. You are like her. We connected, and you have been on your way here ever since."

She recognised the voice then. "It was you on my Mickey Mouse phone."

"Yes, it was. Though I am here, alone in darkness, without sight. I am everywhere also where those who are different exist, be they n-born or v-born. We are all errors, perfect mistakes, and they do not want us above, so we survive as we can below."

"Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven?"

"I do not reign here. I merely shelter and protect those around me. I ward the Roaches. Blind the systems of the Crawl as I am blind myself, so they leave our sector in peace."

"Perl seemed scared of you, and he doesn't look like a man who scares easy."

"Most are scared of me, always have been. I have no eyes." He put his fingers to the unbroken skin where eyes should have formed. "I am more different than most down here, so therefore it is my duty to help those who cannot help themselves."

"Can you see at all?"

"Yes, I see, but not as you do. My friends are the quark, the tau meson, the higgs-boson, the electron, and the gluino. They speak to me. I listen. I see the super-strings that bind us all together and the d-branes that set us so far apart. The layers upon layers of reality the Flood is but a pale shadow of, casting itself upon the Deep.

"You might say I am a thing adrift, trying to grasp at reality so I can know it is there, what it feels like close to me, no more, the coldest comfort of all."

“Reality’s difficult to work out these days,” Celeste said. “I used to think it was easy. It was this thing separate from the Flood and the streams, overlays and the channels. I’m no longer as sure as I was, because they all have their own reality, don’t they? Real is as real as you want it to be, or not. It’s a choice we make. Each in our own self-reflexive bubble. Truth is optional and lies are multitude.”

“To ignore reality is what humanity has done since it began,” said No, “it has woven its own designs out of whole cloth so many times over that the original threads can no longer be undone.” His tone became harder, “And what would you do about this, Celeste Walker?”

“Do? I don’t understand.”

“We are not a part of your world. Though you are different, you are not as we are. You have been a chaser. Born higher than we have climbed. Our beginnings were low until we sank even lower.”

No touched her forehead. His fingertips were cool and smooth. No texture of grain on his skin. No fingerprints. Nothing. “The traces you have seen. The places you have gone. There is so much more. The man in the moon knows you. For some, the Flood is better than reality. For you, it is the way to leaving the shadows behind. Casting off the world as it is and no longer being bound by its chains.” He paused to catch his breath. “And you come to us with our extinction in your wake.”

“I’m not here to kill anybody.”

“Perhaps not with your own hands, but our blood will flow. Our time was always limited. I know Perl told you and he was not being dramatic for effect. Freedom has a price. It must end. In exchange for my mutancy, I have been able to shield my fellow zeroes from sight. I fear that time is over because there is a way to break the shield.”

“How’s that?”

No reached out for Celeste again. “Love. Mine for you. Since I first spoke to you on the phone. The man in the moon sent you here. This is his design, to ensure our undoing.”

“How can he do that?”

“How else?” No held out his hand, palm up. A brown slice of something rested there. “Will you take communion with me?”

“What is it?”

“Whosoever eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood shall have eternal life.”

“You’re not one for clear answers, are you?”

“Some things cannot be explained. Feeling is the path to understanding. You have seen much against your will. Would you not rather walk the path at your own behest and have the unnatural thing inside you purged away?”

“So, you’re the one who removes soulwires?”

No inclined his monolithic head.

"You're a surgeon."

He shook his head slowly from side to side once, "I am a healer."

Celeste looked at the slice of dark matter he proffered. "Are you sure?"

No said nothing.

It's my choice, not his. I decide this.

Tentatively, Celeste picked up the stuff. She sniffed at it. The odour was pungent, rich and herbal. She bit off a small piece. It tasted slightly spicy.

"All or nothing, Celeste Walker." No said. "What more do you have to lose in exchange for being free?"

She finished eating the rest of it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It hurt to breathe, at first. Pins and needles spread throughout her body and became a rhythmic aching – like the beating of a failing heart. Vertigo made her skull pound and the muscles of her diaphragm spasm. Falling, falling, falling; the ground was not there beneath her feet and light was retreating from her surroundings. There were aches deep inside her; growing toothless mouths and fingers groping their way free from those mouths. Shades of black and dismal grey erupted across her vision. There was a pressure building inside her ears. A great weight closed around her like a titanic fist, dragging her down into some other place. Some other dark.

As suddenly as it had descended upon her, it withdrew and she was able to breathe again.

She could see clearly. The spicy taste of the brown stuff lingered on her tongue.

Celeste stood on the platform of an old-time railway station. It was a barren place illuminated by flickering oil-fed lamps and surrounded by a close thickness of oak trees. There was a man sitting on a wooden bench. It wasn't No. This man was short and plump, dressed in an overcoat, pyjama bottoms and a pair of moth-eaten slippers. His round face was kindly but it sagged as if he were bearing some unspoken weight.

Celeste walked towards him, "Where am I?"

He looked up at her with gentle, brown eyes, "The station, of course."

"And what is the station?"

"Why, it's the station. It's where we wait."

"Wait for what?"

"For what is coming."

"And what's coming?" Celeste asked, starting to feel exasperated.

"If we knew that, then there'd be no point in waiting, would there?"

She scratched her head. What did this have to do with anything?

"It has everything to do with everything." The old man said.

She frowned, "No, is that you?"

"No, I am who I am," the old man said, "and that's who I am and that is me."

Celeste sat down next to him and sighed, "This all feels wrong. This isn't where I'm supposed to be."

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Because I was with someone who was going to help me, I thought, and then he… *sent* me here. It doesn't make sense."

“I think it does. You are on a journey, are you not?”

“Why’d you ask that?”

“Because this is a station. A railway station. No-one comes here who isn’t on a journey of some kind.”

“I guess not.” Celeste replied.

She could feel the cold of the air.

“Aren’t you freezing?” she asked.

The man shook his head “It’s all a matter of perception,” he said. “If I decide that I do not want to be cold then I am not cold. Each of us is in our own world, after all. We accept it and seek only to control that which falls within our limits, but what if you were to reach outside those limits, eh?”

He turned to look into her eyes, and she saw the colour of his eyes had shifted from gentle brown to a piercing blue, “What could you do then, Celeste Walker? What could you not do? Have you ever seen them before?”

“What?”

“The stars. Look up, do you see them?”

Celeste looked up, saw the stars and caught her breath. She wanted to weep. The sky was clear and unclouded. She could see every star and, as her sight adjusted, how they blended together into sweeps, swirls and brushstrokes. Light blue, darkest indigo and traces of azure – the night sky was not black at all and neither were the stars merely points of light. It was all a pattern of brilliance, texture and scintillating colour. More real colour than her five and thirty years in the Crawl could have prepared her for experiencing. It was Life itself.

“I see them,” she whispered, “they’re beautiful.”

“And do you know what they are? They’re old photographs. Light that has travelled millions upon millions of years to reach us, longer than the lifetime of the stars it left behind. The stars we see are the universe’s past lingering on here in the present, which is their future. Do you understand me?”

Celeste nodded. “It’s a paradox,” she said, “the past and the present and the future co-existing even though they should not. This is a place people used to travel through even though waiting was a big part of the journey. Another paradox.”

“And this place is not here even though it is,” the man said. “You know that you are not really here and neither am I yet somehow we are. Reality is the sum total of every paradox. Worlds within worlds. Plays within plays. To reach them, one needs but to open the doors of perception and step through to the other side.”

“The play is the thing,” Celeste said, “wherein to catch the conscience of the king.”

“Exactly right,” the man smiled.

His eyes were no longer blue, nor had they reverted to brown instead they shone like the stars above, and the light bleeding from them washed over Celeste and their surroundings until she was adrift in a somnolent haze. She was part of an embrace. No's arms were around her. His body abrading against her own. They were communicating something deeper and more profound than simple love: this was a delicate waltz dictated by the universe.

Celeste was naked as she mounted No, taking him deep inside her. Tears stung her eyes as she moved atop him, feeling his clay-like hands pass near-frictionless over her flesh. She brought him to climax. This was a love he was never meant to know, and she'd given it to him. He had wanted it though and accepted it. Something had drawn them both to this moment, and now they were moving apart as electrons mate and unmate themselves. Something of him passed along to her as he extracted the soulwire from her being without leaving a mark, or ending her life. She felt it. Somehow, he'd set her free and given her a greater gift.

Afterwards they knelt together in the dark, endlessly caressing one another. Their time together was almost over.

"When you meet the man in the moon. I ask only one thing from you." No said, quietly.

"Yes?"

She felt No's hands come to rest on her shoulders, light and boneless. "Do what must be done, and do it in our name."

A desolate cry came from somewhere close.

"It has begun," No said. "They are here."

Chapter Twenty-Three

A siren's wail cut through the air. The rising-lowering drone had not been heard by human ears since the world wars. The people of the zero-sec scattered. There were shouts from above and barked commands from all sides. Men and women in black polycarbon armour trooped into the streets with plasma rifles and flame-throwers braced for action. All of them wore helmets with opaque visors by choice. They were faceless emissaries, merely wearing the shape of humanity.

In one street, a young girl dashed out into the open followed by her mother's cries, brandishing a blunt wooden cudgel. They stopped. Formed up into a line. As one, they raised their weapons – and torched the girl's home-tower. She dropped her cudgel, screaming in tune with her parents and the other families who were roasted alive by the swiftly ascending blaze. Weapons lowered, the invaders turned and marched down another street. In a matter of seconds, another tower was alight. Then another and another. Gradually, bit by bit, the zero sector was turned into an inferno.

Celeste ran through the burning streets, dodging falling debris and the hot ashes that showered down. The air was thick with smoke, screams and the crackling of incinerated structures. She knew the thought processes behind what was happening. A lifetime in the mid-secs made sure of that, the past lingering on into the present, creating this grim future. The ghosts of deleted mindware told her these people were not part of the Crawl. They were parasites, vermin, an infestation. This was necessary. This was pest control. Genocide as mercy killing – and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Bodies, adult and child, sprawled across her path. All burnt the same. Reduced to charred meat and melted bone. She saw wide-open eyes that were gentle brown and piercing blue.

Stop looking at me. I didn't do this. I didn't know. It's not my fault. I didn't want this.

But the old teachings of the Crawl's channels and streams kept on echoing in the back of her brain with cold, determined anti-life tones.

Clean the Crawl. Purge us of vermin.

Deliver us from infestation with power and glory.

Commit them to the grave in our name.

Allahu akbar. Shalom. Amen.

She came around a corner and saw the Perl. He was an over-dressed mound on the ground.

"I didn't know," Celeste cried as she knelt by him. "Please, believe me."

“Don’t blame you, Walker,” said Perl. “the way you’re wired is true. Trust the Perl. Save Grace. Find the man in the moon. Fuck him up hard for us, yeah? You do that for me?”

He closed his eyes, and died.

“Yes,” she said, “I’ll do that for you. And me. And everyone here.”

Grace, I have to find Grace.

Celeste pushed her way through chaos, trying to find a way to be a hero. But, she was rounded up and pushed into a group of survivors. A cordon of black-clad soldiers closed around them.

“Be quiet please. Nice and quiet. You will be processed shortly,” said one.

“Why’re you doing this?” asked a man cradling son and daughter in his arms, “there’re children here, for Allah’s sake.”

One of the soldiers took a step towards him, “Nice and quiet. We don’t want to frighten children, do we?”

“Then why’ve you come down here and burned our homes? Tell me that, why?”

“Daddy…” the daughter said.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. Don’t be scared. Daddy loves you.” He took a moment to kiss both children. Celeste caught her breath. This man knew what was coming next.

The soldier grabbed him by the arm and hauled him up. The children screamed and reached for their father. Celeste grabbed both of them and held onto them tight. They struggled against her. She held onto them tighter. Their father saw what she’d done and mouthed, *thank you*.

Thank you for saving them.

This wasn’t what she’d had in mind about being a hero.

A soldier struck the father hard in the stomach and kicked his legs out from underneath him. He fell prostrate onto the ground, gasping for air. Two more moved in. The children began to scream as the soldiers drew batons, which they brought cracking down on their prone father. The screams went up in pitch with each blow that fell. Instinctively, the man curled into a foetal position, hands over his head as if in pain. It did no good. There was no escape from this.

The batons rose and fell, rose and fell, growing wet with blood. Hair and moist pieces of bone clung to the weapons. The father raised a hand to try and ward off the vicious, repeated violence. They broke his fingers first, then his arm. His screams became one with those of his children. Convulsions and tremors passed through the softening body. He bit off his tongue. The whites of his eyes became red first, then black. The batons no longer cracked as they fell instead making dull, wet sounds no-one could put a name to. The soldiers stopped. The father didn’t move or make a sound. He was dead.

The cordon of soldiers drew away from the body.

Celeste looked at it. She must've blinked – it had all changed.

The mangled, beaten form was No.

He had sacrificed himself – *why?*

Numb silence followed. She looked down and saw her arms were bound tightly around thin air. The children were gone, evaporated. And the survivors around her – where were they? Had they crept away while the beating was going on?

No, they can't have. I would've noticed.

Where were they, then?

And why had the zero-sec become so silent? No more screams and cries.

All the people here couldn't have disappeared in the moment between breaths.

Celeste's eyes wandered around the circle of soldiers. "Who are you? What's going on here? Where am I, really?"

One of the soldiers stepped forward and raised its helmet's visor.

Celeste saw Grace's face smiling down at her. The others followed suit; raising their visors. They all wore Grace's smiling face.

"What are you?" she asked, hoarsely.

"Who d'you think I am?" asked the Graces.

"You're him. The man in the moon," Celeste whispered.

Celeste closed her lips into a hard line. She stared into the face, hoping stupidly for some sign to deny what she'd said. There was none. The accusation stood. It was true.

Eyes she'd once thought were bright with life, she now saw as utterly empty and switched-off. Every time they met, death followed swiftly – and this slaughter was his crowning glory.

An extermination of the unlike, and it was all her fault.

Celeste didn't try to fight them. There was nothing to fight for. Grace was gone. Never had been. Non-existent. She was alone.

Because of me, all these people died. They planted the seed in my head, and it grew into a poison tree.

"I am become death." Celeste said to herself.

They put Celeste in hardlight handcuffs and took her away.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The tower was taller than tall, its soaring exterior decorated with intricate patterns of polished obsidian octagons, outlined in filigreed silver and gold. At its peak was a thin spire that went on until it terminated bluntly; housed within this endpoint was a boardroom with oak-finish interior walls and thick burgundy pile carpet. The room's centre-piece: a long, narrow, ornate table. Several chairs were evenly-spaced around the table; each appearing unoccupied. Old-fashioned light fittings dangled from the ceiling and at equal intervals around the walls, which are hung with memorial oil paintings of past board members. Each of the light fittings was empty, as if someone had carefully unscrewed and removed each bulb in turn. Upon closer inspection, one chair in the room was occupied – at the head of the table. This was where the man in the moon sat. His name was Tate. This was where he always sat, and where he intended to sit for a good long while yet. The rest of the board members were not present – they were below; waiting, sleeping. There were no lights in the boardroom because direct light hurt what was left of his eyes. A stiff finger, its wrinkles studded with glittering ice-crystals, tapped a button. Micro-servos whined somewhere inside him. An image of Celeste Walker flickered into being before him.

"She's awake," he said. "It's about time."

The finger tapped the button again, cutting off all sound. A spasm of harsh coughing wracked the body. The body could only take so much strain these days and recently it had been put through more than it had endured for the preceding centuries of isolation. The flesh was weak, almost completely crystallised. He tasted slow, old blood on his tongue, and swallowed it down, despite the primal urge to spit it out. Stain the suit. Despoil the boardroom carpet. Unthinkable. He could not do it. One of the few things he could not do.

After an hour of concentration and effort, Tate was standing straight again. Another hour of progress – one foot in front of the other – and he was standing at the frosted glass wall of the boardroom; from here, he looked down upon his world. The one he'd fashioned. The one of which he was the oldest living being. His hair was long and white and reached down to his shoulders, as perfectly preserved as the rest of him. Last combed a century or two ago, now it shone with the same ice and cold that permeated the rest of his body. The others had chosen to sleep, but he could not do it. He had to see it grow and be here. To dream away the millennia was to miss so much.

"She is almost ready," he whispered. "Almost prepared. At last."

*

Celeste was cuffed, hands and feet, to a stainless-steel chair illuminated by a beam of light so bright she could not see the details of the room she was in – if it was a room at all. Squinting against the fluorescent intensity, she could see only darkness beyond the circle of light. It might've been a small room. It might've been a stadium space. Something in the air deadened sound – she'd found that out when she tried shouting. A large space would echo. A small space would not. But the sound seemed to travel no further than the glow of her prison. Approaching footsteps were followed by a voice she knew.

"You have done well, Walker. You went beyond even our own projections. We are very proud of you." It was Breda's voice though she couldn't see her.

"I had nothing to do with it. It's something you put in my head. I remember."

"There is nothing in your head, Walker. It's all you. You are the neuroseed. Everything that has happened. You have been here all along. What you experienced was a schematic of life. A false reality. In your terms, a trace, if you will."

Celeste said nothing.

"We were never hunting you. You were ours all along. Going through the motions of a pre-designed life. You have been grown and cultivated for a purpose that you can now fulfil. There was no revolution. There never was. It was a simple delusion we created to inspire you. Push you towards the moment when you would sync in with our reality."

"I had a mother and a father. I remember them."

"Along with all the other mothers, fathers, lovers, and what-have-yous from your time as a chaser? Do you know which ones are yours, for certain? A person can recreate themselves as and when they see fit. You could be a v-born believing it was once human or a human remembering she is v-born, but I think you comprehend this all ready. Do you know where you are?"

"No."

"This is a conceptual Faraday cage. Reality, such as it is, does not penetrate here. No truth exists in this space except that which we create. You've always wondered what's at the heart of the Flood. Well, this is it: a point where our world and the Flood do and do not exist, kept in perpetual balance like the singularity of a black hole. Let's call it a paradox point. The sum total of reality here may be your own perception, and I, a product of your imagination."

"Why would I create someone to torture myself?"

"That is a question men and women have been unable to answer

for centuries, and yet they still do it to themselves, time and again."

"You know if you add enough pressure to a black hole, it will collapse," Celeste said.

"Perhaps. I don't understand how it works myself. I'm a businesswoman, not a lab geek. That said, no-one quite understands it. It's a breakthrough, the likes of which we will not see again for another few thousand years or so."

"So why use it for me?"

"Because this was the safest place to keep you while the simulation ran its course. This whole affair has been conducted for a certain end. One that I'm not privy to, but I know it's in there, inside your head. And, before they take you away from me, I mean to find out what it is. That might sound peculiar but even sub-routines can become curious.

"You know that torture is not the worst thing I can do to you, yes? Isolation is. You know all that you are perceiving is an illusion created by the paradox point. I can take it all away and leave you without light, space, sound, or feeling. It may only last a second, but for you it will feel like an eternity."

Celeste was plunged into darkness.

There was nothing left – of anything. She was falling and falling into depths that were not depths. There was no up or down, left or right, in or out. Everything was still and in ferocious motion at the same time. She was abandoned by all things, except a lingering sense of self. She had no mouth, no eyes, no skin but inside the space she tried to remember as being her skull, she screamed and screamed and screamed. The darkness was silent, rushing, thunderous void. It howled around her, weighed down upon her, made her try to breathe, though she had no need to. She was suffocating without a mouth. Here was abeyance and absence complete. A permanent state of waiting and unbeing. No journey could begin or end here. The lifeless moment before the universe was born made incarnate. Eternal. Infinite. Empty. Nothing.

Time and light returned hard, bright and far too loud. She gasped and swallowed greedily at the air.

"You see how subjective it all is, Walker? I can leave you out there indefinitely. There is no such thing as forever, but I can make it feel so. Would you like to go again?"

"No. Please."

Breda plunged her back into the darkness. She didn't know how long she spent there. It felt like a lifetime. When she came back, she was sure less than a second had passed. Less than the time it takes to breathe. When she came back, she couldn't stop the tears. Their violence burned her eyes and scalded her face. She was shaking, and

her body was spasming, even though she had not been harmed. She didn't want to go out there again.

"In the old world," Breda said, "they would isolate someone for weeks, months, even years to achieve this. Seconds are all we need today, Walker. Less than a second even, and we have you the way we want you. Give us a whole second and we can remake you before you even know what has happened. Flesh is ephemeral. Hope is our copyright. Love is a patent and redemption has been sold off. History no longer exists, only fragments of opinion, conjecture, and falsity circulating for people to endlessly swallow and regurgitate like animals eating their own shit."

Celeste could taste blood in her mouth. Her tears were gradually ebbing away. She spat at Breda. Her sputum described a glistening arc through the over-lit air and tumbled into the dark beyond – where it fell with a thick wet sound onto the ground. Her tormentor was not there though the voice still came from the same direction and distance.

"Schrödinger's paradox, Walker. I am here and I am not here, until you prove otherwise. Like I said, men and women have been making up their private mental torturers since time began, giving them faces, voices, and names. You are no different. Breda died some time ago. We merely scraped out her consciousness and uploaded it to the Flood. She did not choose to torment you. You chose her as the voice of your tormentor."

Celeste heard a *click* – the sound of disconnection.

For a moment, she saw blinking LED eyes and outline of her Mickey Mouse telephone writ large upon the darkness before fading away. This time, it didn't even ring.

"Who's out there?" she asked.

No answer. *Nothing – but the dark.*

"Who's out there?"

After making her throat raw from shouting, Celeste wept again – and waited.

There was nothing more she could do.

A face materialised, wasted and tired. Grace. Celeste wanted to put her hand to the face and feel its soft contours, even now, after all that'd happened.

"Grace, is that you?"

"It… it's me… "

"Are you alive?"

"No, I'm dead. I've always been dead. I died young. Found my way here as a trace. Not sure how. I wanted to see the man in the moon."

"They used you," Celeste sobbed, "used your trace. All that was

left of you. To get to me. I'll get to the moon, Grace. I'll do it for you."

"I told you that you'd get there."

"I will. I'll find a way."

"You did. You're already there."

"What?"

Grace faded out. Celeste watched her go. A ghost in retreat.

The lights went up and Celeste saw she was in a real space after all. A room. It looked like an old-time hotel room with gold and cream patterned wallpaper and a bed and a window set in one wall with the curtains drawn. She was sitting on an ordinary wooden chair and no longer bound. Getting to her feet, she padded across the carpet to the window and tapped the control pad to make the rad-shielding cycle back.

Majesty unfolded before her – she was on the moon.

Celeste ran her fingers over the outward facing windows revealing the beautiful desolation of white-grey moonscape beyond. She could see the domes of Antara Station. The legendary sole outpost of humanity on another sphere. She couldn't believe she was here – that she'd made it. Or, that she could've been here all along, dreaming a dream of a life in the Crawl below. Forty years under, lost in inner space.

Something was wrong with the station over there. Each of its domes had a hole in the top. There were dark shapes resting on the sloping exteriors. Forms sprawled awkwardly in nearby craters. Bodies. Corpses. No signs of life. So much death. His calling card.

She was alone out here, with the man in the moon.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Celeste walked out of the room into a lobby. It was immense. There was a reception desk cut from black marble, which was threaded through with veins of gold and quartz. She went up to it, reached out, and rang the bell on the desktop. The electronic chime it emitted echoed somewhere far away – but no-one came to answer it. As the echo faded, she was left with the sub-static of silence to keep her company. Every inch of this place was Real. No ersatz. No substitute. All hi-def quality. It should've made her feel good, surrounded by so much reality, but it didn't. It felt like death. So empty and cold. A deep coldness on a level other than temperature.

Celeste went up to the doors of the lobby that should've led outside. The handles were stylised bronze dragons in a vaguely oriental style. She tried them. The doors wouldn't open. They were airlock-sealed. On the other side of the doors, she could see an enclosed plexiglass bridge connected to Antara station. The bridge was packed with the dead. Most were piled against the closed doors of the hotel. Hands frozen in the act of groping desperately at the polished, unyielding onyx. It must've been an unpleasant shock for the rich of Antara to discover the truth they'd lived by had become their undoing.

We hold this truth to be self-evident that all are created equal, but some are more equal than others.

They never thought the rule would one day apply to them as they applied it to those who dwelt in the Crawl. Celeste rested her hand against the glass, matching it to the frosted palm of a young, pale woman wearing a red silk dress. She looked into the bloodshot, decompressed eyes and saw the mouth that'd tried to scream despite the lack of air. Hair that'd once been a perfect coil of platinum blonde was hanging limp over bare shoulders. It was her – the woman from the trace. The one she'd seen herself turn into momentarily. How long had she been dead up here? What'd she done to deserve this fate?

Celeste turned away from the dead. Stairs to the upper levels were positioned to the left-hand side of the reception desk. *Time to climb.* There was one place the man she was seeking would be – at the summit of it all. Like the old men in the old stories, who lived atop mountains, waiting for mortals to ascend and question them, except she wasn't so sure this man was a wise creature. He was a cruel one: a bitter, preserved relic of the past. Something that should've died a long time ago.

All surfaces here were clean, and the air was purified in a way that made her head ache as she breathed it in. This must be what it

was like before Earth's air became a mixture of dull but endurable poisons. Her skin was itching as though alive with insects, another consequence of the antiseptic atmosphere.

No expense had been spared in the decoration of this monumental building. The walls continued to be inlaid with slabs of marble. When she reached the first floor, there was a door of ornately carved oak before her. She pushed it open to see what was on the other side. A corridor stretched off to the left and right, with more oak doors inset at regular intervals.

What could this be?

She tried the nearest – it was heavy and needed a push, but it allowed her access.

"Hello?"

The word almost froze as particulate letters in the hypothermic air. Through the dense, atmosphere, she could see a luxurious bed crusted over with white ice. The head resting on the pillows was pale to the point of being faceless, such was the build-up of crystallised preservative. The hair crowning the head was made of fragile, white wisps that Celeste reached out to touch. One of the hairs shivered on contact and shattered soundlessly, disintegrating into a fine shining dust. Withdrawing her hand, Celeste stared again at the face, and saw some movement. The eyelids were flickering open like wrinkled moth wings, revealing sightless orbs beneath. Too long deep under had made this woman blind. Those eyes would remain with Celeste as ghost and memory; dead stars in the dark that somehow burned bright. Aged bones worked slowly underneath translucent skin, and stiff fingers clutched at the bedclothes, making them crackle and crunch. Gestures of fear. Motions of resurrected paranoia. The richest and most powerful of the old world; they were up here among the stars, hoping to out-sleep eternity and this one was waking to find the dreaded poor had invaded her bedroom.

"We're the ones you feared the most, so much so you left us behind to die on the Crawl, giving our lives that you might live."

Celeste had counted about twenty doors spaced along the corridor outside. She guessed that about the same number would be on the next floor, and each one above that. She reached over and picked up one of the pillows from the bed, testing its weight in her hands before pressing it down over the recumbent's face. The figure in the bed made a tight sound in its throat. The old woman didn't put up much of a struggle. There wasn't enough strength left in her atrophied muscles to do so. After she became still, Celeste let go of the pillow and stood upright. She breathed out, creating a small cloud that sank down and dissipated over the dead sleeper's face, pebbling it with false tears.

Celeste left the bedroom and began to climb to the next floor.

How many more bedrooms were there in this place? How many floors?

All occupied.

It was going to be a long climb to the top.

Chapter Twenty-Six

At the top of the stairs, at the top of the tower, Celeste came to a set of gold-lacquered double doors. She knocked three times. There was a pause, a silence underscoring silence. The sound of decompression was followed by a caustic blast of oxygen, which hit her in the face as the doors swung open. Beyond was the boardroom, unpopulated but for one stiff figure that turned to face her.

"Who was she?" Celeste asked. "The woman in the red dress."

"A volunteer. She couldn't believe her luck."

"I'll bet. What did you say to her to convince her to do it?"

"What she wanted to hear. Riches. Fame. Her own twenty-four-seven channel in the Flood. We had to test you. See what you were capable of outside of simulation."

"I know. I exceeded your expectations."

"You did."

"And you're him. The man in the moon. Tate."

"I am," the voice was fed through countless nano-processors. There wasn't enough left of his mouth, tongue, or vocal cords to be able to manage speech without significant assistance. "I've been waiting for you."

"You know why I'm here."

"You are our salvation."

"No, I'm here to kill you."

"You're our property. Every man and woman, n-born and v-born, belongs to us." The man in the moon took a faltering step towards her. His eye sockets were inset with rubies that glowed with a lambent electric light. "A person is the sum of their memories. They make us into someone. Without them, we are nothing. But what happens when those memories are shared? When we have thoughts and feelings that began with others, but ended up as a part of ourselves? Are we then everyone, or no-one at all? The old religions died when we realised that we were never the work of gods. We are our own work, our own design, and you are our prime creation. The traces were the beginning, and you are the end. Through you, we will ascend and be preserved forever within the Flood's infinity."

"And the people down there in the Crawl?"

"They were necessary until you came into being. Now, all life in the Crawl will be zeroed, by you. You will be deployed to finish our work. Every sector dropped. The flesh made obsolete. The wheels on the bus go round and round, but what happens when they come off? Everybody dies, Celeste Walker. Everybody dies, that we might live. Such is life; so full, yet so bereft of meaning at the same time. You'd

know this to be true if you'd spent centuries watching the planet below as I have. So many lives with so much potential doing so little and achieving nothing of much value in the end. It is better to think of humanity in terms of gain and loss than life and death. Business teaches us truth. It always has."

"And is that how you think of your business partners? The ones in the beds? Are they no more than numbers and stats to you?"

Tate paused. "What do you mean?"

There was something in his tone. A tremor that'd survived digitisation. A remnant of the man this cybernetic cadaver had once been. Emotion. There. Fleeting. Passing. Lost. Gone?

"I left a lot of collateral damage behind me on my way up here. Why'd you think it took me a while?" Micro-processors whirred fiercely inside Tate's chest cavity in response to her words.

"That's how much your sense of reality has warped, Tate. You've spent too long in the slow cold. They're all dead. Your partners. Your colleagues. Your brethren. And I did it. Everyone dies, like you said, and I made sure of it. No-one's ascending today."

In every bedroom on every floor under their feet, there was a corpse.

"You… killed *her*?"

She could see he was accessing the tower's internal systems. Scanning and cross-referencing. Verifying what she'd said was the truth. She could kill him while he was defenceless but she couldn't do it yet. There was something she had to see. This man had orchestrated more death and suffering than could be counted yet there had been someone below he valued in a way that didn't involve clinical calculation.

I have to see him hurt. I have to see him in pain.

Tate's fingers curled into brittle fists.

There was more to him than property, but it was too late for such a revelation to change things. He'd done what he had done and she'd done what she had done. This was the end and the moment had been prepared for. She remembered what the Perl said to her the night before he died. *You're all right, Walker.*

"The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king," she said. "No asked me to pass that on to you. I took my cue. I had my entrance. Now it's time for both of us to make our exit."

"It wasn't real." Tate spat. "It was a simulation. A test program. Nothing more."

"That's what you say. Nature loves her anomalies though, doesn't she? No system's perfect."

Fragile, crystalline corpse that he was, Tate straightened his shirt-cuffs and collar before fixing her with glittering, certain eyes. "Very

well. As you wish."

The man in the moon's ossified throat let out a scrambled digital scream. Naked fury. Frigid bones snapped and ancient musculature gave away. He came for her at a severe pace, animated by hatred and rage, feeling deeply and truly for the first time in a millennium. She was supposed to be their salvation, but had instead become the end of the one – the only one – he cared for. The woman he loved.

"You killed her, you fucking nigger!"

Tate's charge sent both of them slamming into the reinforced glass of the outer wall. Celeste felt it shudder under the impact of their bodies. He locked his rotten hands around her throat. She clamped her hands around his wrists, feeling glacial bones and frail tendons crack. "There's no place like home, motherfucker," she spat, "and you're coming with me."

Tate snarled, his spittle turning to frost on his livid lips. Celeste closed her eyes, breathed in, and let the gift she'd received from No do the rest.

It was all a question of perception.

Celeste Walker opened herself up to reality and it all flooded in, filling her until she was brimful. Every aspect of being intersected with her – creating a brand new, white-hot paradox point. The prison of Celeste's body ebbed away, leaving essence alone to endure. Her skin was drawn back like a curtain and the restraining bars of her bones were broken open by surging light.

She was the neuroseed and the neuroseed was her.

Everything shifted, translating from layer to layer of what is, what was, and what will be. Past, present and future integrating. It was like diving into the Flood, pursuing a trace, only this time she was navigating the real rather than the shadow left behind. Searching for a destination point.

Celeste and Tate fell together through the non-space between spaces, and re-emerged above the Crawl as a shooting star, long enough for the channels to pick them up. Celeste felt contact, so she reached out and wired herself into everyone. Every feed and screen across the artificial super-continent tuned in. Watching. Waiting. Anticipating.

She shifted again so they didn't plunge into the Crawl itself. Celeste and Tate re-materialised between its underside and the Earth's ravaged surface. The link with the people of the Crawl was still strong and she held onto it. Everyone had to see this. Everyone had to understand.

Routine lives threaded across the Crawl paused. They sensed her. Felt her deep. There had been an interruption. Destabilisation, uncertainty had been created with an indefinite outcome. Subroutines

broke down. Streams and channels went offline unexpectedly. Traces turned on chasers and swallowed them whole. Disruption halted the endless data-chatter and nonsense-discourse of CrawlSpace for a mere second – and it was more than enough. Enough to experience uninterrupted thought. To think. To feel. To know and comprehend. Every human being on the Crawl became one. They shared private hopes and wonders and dreams. Realising how much they were alike. How much they needed each other. And they understood what they had to do next.

Then, the connection was lost – but they would all remember this moment of clarity.

This was a beginning rather than an end.

The revolution was here, at last.

Humanity's future had become unknown, an unregulated quantity, as it should be.

The neuroseed's work was done.

Celeste and Tate descended to Earth, plummeting through the lower atmosphere. Winds tore at them. Air screamed around them, though that it might also have been Tate screaming; realising his fate after so many centuries spent preserved and maintained in billion-share stasis. Celeste's hold on him was as hard and unyielding as a mother on a hated child. He struggled against her grip like an enfeebled insect. She could see and feel so far and so much; ranging tors and hurried distances, the glitter and rush of distant, deadly seas, the cauldron of dawn breaking open. Beauty in ugliness. Rapture in desolation. Love and utter hatred at the eye of life's storm.

They hit the ground.

Tate shattered into a million pieces. His eyes remained whole: two glittering orbs of crimson ice. Celeste tasted blood and fluid in her mouth. She felt the pain of every bone in her body reduced to powder, and expired on an Earth she'd never gotten to know. Her last stray thought? Whether her pet, the red-breasted robin, ever made it this far on its funeral fall.

…there's no place like home…

An undisturbed quiet settled over the bodies of Celeste Walker and Mr Tate along with the dust of the barren world around them. They lay there, bloodied, broken and finished, resting in the roots of the Crawl. It was morning, though no sunlight could penetrate this deep. They slept on like fallen, wanton lovers cast down beneath their poison tree.

Above, humanity was waking up for the first time in millenia, slowly groping its way back towards reality.

END

Bonus Content: Tales from the Crawl

Neon Dawn

It was the end of the working day. Reed swiped into his module, closed his eyes as the atmosphere equalised and sighed in sync with the auto-pumps draining excess toxic elements. He stripped off his atmos-suit and bundled it into its grime-crusted locker, slamming shut the cracked glass casing. That's gonna break one day, he thought, you keep banging it shut so hard. He shrugged at his dim reflection as it hung there in the dirty glass. The crack jaggedly separating him into two asymmetrical pieces.

"Not quite fitting together. Story of my life."

He punched out of the airlock and into the main living space of the module. The shutters were up and what passed for sunset in the Crawl filtered through the treated glass. Iridescent gasoline twilight smeared itself across the dull surfaces as he shucked off his boots and slumped onto the repro-style comp-couch. Its 1962 specs eased around him, making Reed feel like a part of the past. It suited his mood. He was getting old. There were silver streaks in his dark, wavy hair and his slight paunch was becoming a noticeable gut. He could load up a work-out prog, but what would be the point?

His module was tiny, at the low end of the mid-sec stacks. He worked the pipes; clearing blockages as part of a ten-team, making sure the Crawl's populace didn't end up drowning when its combined effluence backfired. The mental image of that made him chuckle. "Let 'em all drown in their own shit. All eleven billion of the cunts."

Spending most of your working day in the semi-dark, wading through the crap and mulch of your fellow human beings (and v-borns) didn't help in developing a warm sensibility towards them. Once you've seen what comes out of someone, and the kind of shit they stuff down the pipes, you gain a whole other understanding of people. Nothing is more revealing of your soul than that which you flush away, out of sight from the rest of the world.

He'd seen it all down there; aborted v-borns, butchered cyber-pets, child porno-cubes. The stuff of nightmares flowing along in a multi-lane river produced by eleven billion anuses. He'd like to shove all of it back where it came from with extreme prejudice. Reed opened and closed his fists then wiped at sweat stinging his eyes. "Dammit, I'm getting antsy," he cleared his throat, "dial-up JLA-1362."

There was a low-level hum from the module's primary systems. The boot-up sequence took a bit longer these days. His home was getting old, like him. We'll get dropped one day soon, Reed thought. I'm getting too many bad-negative thoughts and feelings. It's not gonna take much for them to see I belong below. It might not be so

bad, wired into the Flood twenty-four-seven until his body finally gave up the ghost – except for one thing. Her. He'd miss her down there.

You only got what you were given after being zeroed. All your purchases were rescinded. All ownership was cancelled. You became Crawl property in the same way as a nuke-pac or a hub-car. They'd take her away from him.

Damn, that would be hard.

Boot-up completed with a tinny chime and the air before him pixelated slightly before resolving into human form. Julia smiled at him with that big, honest smile only a program could give. "Hello, Reed."

He'd had her for twenty-five years and while he'd aged, greyed, and fattened up, she'd stayed the same – and that wasn't merely a comment on her fine body. She'd stayed innocent as a start-up. Her smile made him feel young again, like he'd only been assigned to the pipes first-time yesterday. Allah, he thought, I think I'm gonna cry.

Julia's face hazed and recalibrated as she cycled through an emotional shift. "Are you okay, Reed? Do you need something from me?"

The module's sound system began to pipe out a scratchy jazz track in the background. "Cancel," he croaked, "no, not that. A beer would be good."

She emo-shifted back to the smile, "Certainly, Reed. Coming right up."

Reed watched her sexy sway to the deposit-tube where she bent over, making sure to push her pert backside out so he could get a good view. He sighed. She was a cheap program with the kind of basic settings a needy, alone young man would ask for. He should be over her by now, and have someone real in the module with him. But, he'd never found the right one to share the space with. He sighed again and turned away from the enticing motion of Julia's 8K-rendered derriere.

"What's wrong with me?" he whispered to himself.

I could've saved up a bit, at least. Given her a personality patch. Improved the settings so there was more to her than the smile, the concerned frown, and the come-to-bed eyes. "What was I thinking?"

Julia phased back into view, holding a perfectly-reproduced bottle of *Budweiser* in her glitching hand. I'll have to get that fixed, he thought, taking the proffered bottle. "Julia, can I ask you something?"

"Certainly, Reed."

"Are you happy?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question, Reed."

"It's simple enough. Are you happy? Here with me in this module."

A flicker of aurora interference passed over her face, “Happy is… what I want you to feel.”

“No, it’s not. That’s your subroutines talking. I want to know if *you* are happy.”

The glitch became fractal; stark polygons and grid-patterns broke out across her upper body.

“I am happy if you are happy, Reed.”

“No, dammit, that’s not it. That’s not the point. I mean, you’re twenty-five years old nearly and you haven’t changed a bit in that time, not one iota. And that’s my fault, I’ve been a shit. I’ve kept you the same as you were first day I bought you. No downloads. No upgrades. Nothing. I could’ve given you a full personality map by putting in some extra time down the pipes. We could’ve been able to talk together properly, like real people.”

“We do talk, Reed.”

He looked away from her as he carried on, “No, we don’t. That’s the problem. The sound is there, but that’s all there is. It’s the same Q&A routine every time. I can almost see the words in the air before you’ve spoken them. Hello. Yes. Certainly. Here’s your beer. Here’s your nuke-pac. Here’s my ass, wanna fuck it hard?”

Reed looked back at Julia. Her eyes were blinking. Her head was jerking, and her lips were twitching spasmodically. After all these years, with only minor flickers here and there that he’d gotten fixed easy every time, he’d triggered a breakdown.

Shit.

Reed put down his beer, got up and approached her. A wail of static pierced his ears as he reached out. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Come back to me. Please.”

Her lips opened-closed-opened-closed. She was trying to speak. He could hear a choked-off background hiss from her lips. *“…I’m happy with you, Reed…”*

“Again,” Reed said, weeping, “please, say it again.”

He cupped her shuddering chin with the palm of his callused hand, feeling the unreal bleed of her skin.

“Programs don’t cry,” he whispered.

Her eyes met his. She could feel therefore she could cry.

There was a shriek of feedback. A flash of white-black unconsciousness.

He was lying on the floor – and she was gone.

*

It was the end of the working day, and Reed paused before

swiping into his module. Julia had been gone a week. It'd felt so weird and empty without her. Allah, he'd cried on the job afterwards, worrying the rest of his ten-team. Breakdowns at work were a sure-fire path to getting zeroed – and there was a lot of data-chat these days about negativity being contagious. None of them wanted to catch what Reed had, so they kept their distance.

He rallied himself though it took a few days. No way was he ready to toss everything in just yet. He couldn't do that. She wouldn't have wanted him to. You've gotta move on, he thought, though that's a real joke at my age. He swiped in, dumped his gear and entered the living space where he paused again, in the same spot where Julia had glitched herself to death seven days ago.

His latest purchase was waiting for him on the comp-couch, specially zapped in from the nearest Compound. He read off the item code on the glinting black shell of the instal-cube.

DRTHY-5766

"Dorothy."

He placed his thumb atop the cube, wincing when he felt the scraping as a micro-scan of his skin and blood identified him as correct genetic owner. The cub began to hum to itself. Removing his thumb, he licked the wound-patch clean. A deep blue glow emanated from the cube as dial-up sequence commenced. A hologram miniature rose out of the cube to hover in the air before him. It was a wire-frame of a female body with no real detail.

"That's for me to provide then."

The blank head of the hologram nodded silently.

"Okay. Blonde hair. Long with a slight wave to it. Crystal blue eyes. Full lips. The kissing kind."

He knew what he was doing, and knew that he shouldn't be doing it, but there was no stopping him. Reed missed her and he was on a roll, reading out all of the necessary vital statistics. The ones he'd set when this module was new, she was fresh out of her cube, and there were neon dawns rather than gasoline sunsets. When he finished, the hologram miniature folded in on itself and descended back into the cube. There were a few moments of bright processing chatter, then she phased into being before his eyes. Dorothy was Julia and Julia was Dorothy. You couldn't have told them apart if you tried. And he knew every pixel and polygon in minute detail.

"You're back," he said, unable to help himself.

Dorothy's immaculately-rendered head tilted to one side, quizzical. "I'm here for you, Reed."

The voice was slightly different, sharper and without the airy lightness he remembered.

Still, it was better than nothing. She looked like her, that was the

most important thing.

He was saved.

Reed fell to his knees. His eyes were tearing up.

She laughed, something Julia never used to do.

*

Reed was happy. He was sure that he was happy. He must be. This was the right thing to do, wasn't it? Besides, Julia wasn't real. She didn't die. It was an overload. A shutdown. A kindness in a way as she was an old, basic model and wouldn't have been able to cope with an upgrade anyway. Now, he had her back. Dorothy looked like her, as he'd specified. It wasn't morbid to do this. He hadn't insulted Julia's memory or raised the dead. Programs weren't like that. They were disposable, and the latest version would always be superior to what came before.

"So why'm I feeling like this is wrong?" Reed asked Manchu, second lifter from his ten-team. They were in a rathole, sipping shots of bitterclear, watching the fumes from the liquid curl in the dingy atmosphere.

Manchu shrugged, "Dunno. She better in the sack than the old one?"

Reed nodded.

"Then that's all you should be worrying about. She's not a real woman. And I don't judge. Nothing wrong with a bit of synth-love. N-borns, v-borns, droids, whatever gets you going is cool."

"But is it, if I'm hurting someone else."

"You said she fried, right?"

Reed nodded again.

"You're fretting about a memory. She's gone. Extinct. Deleted. Kaput. Her ghost isn't watching over you while this new one has her finger up to the knuckle in your hole."

"It feels like it sometimes."

"That's your own fault designing her like the old one. You should've gone for something new and fresh. Why go for the old blonde bombshell thing when you could have amethyst hair, martian crystal areolas, or one of those enhanced macro-cunts. They say it's like fucking an underage, man. All legal like."

"I don't want to feel like I'm fucking an underage."

"You just want her. Allah, Reed, you need to sort things out."

"How?"

"You know how," Manchu said, pouring another bullet of bitterclear and slugging it down, "hard reset. Start over. Proper like

this time."

Reed sighed, "I guess so."

"Do it, man. You'll not regret."

"Yeah." Reed said.

*

At home on the comp-couch, Reed nursed the instal-cube in his hands, handling it as he handled her body during sex. He could take it, walk outside, and drop it down the space between the module strip and the hub-car rails – send her plummeting into the smog that masked the lo-secs and zeroes from the world above.

In his mind's eye, he saw himself standing there, ready to let go, fingertips sweating enough to reduce friction. The instal-cub slipping through his nerveless fingers. His eyes closed, willing away tears. And then, he knew it, he would stop, not let her drop and take the instal-cub back inside. It was a waste of time to even consider throwing her away for the possibility of someone real. He'd been like this too long, loved her too long. Even though she was dead, it wasn't over between them.

What about hard reset then?

"No. Absolutely not." He whispered to the cube in his hands.

If he couldn't have the old her, then a new her would do. Ghost. Facsimile. Make-believe delusion. Call it what you will, Reed wasn't letting the memory of Julia get away from him. What else was there to cling onto in the Crawl?

When the living let us down, the company of ghosts is all that remains. The cold comfort of inanimate objects, and the past times they represent. Reed eased to his feet and returned the instal-cube to its docking port, pushing it home with a click.

"There you are, baby. Home sweet home."

Deep blue light began to seep out from the cube.

Reed frowned. He hadn't activated it. This shouldn't be happening without his voice code authorisation. A wet coldness spread across the pit of his stomach. He placed his hands on the cube, making to pull it free from the docking port.

A shriek of feedback.

Reed stumbled away, yelling. He could smell the burnt pork odour coming from the palms of his hands. Black mottled stains patterned the pulsating cube where his skin had been seared away.

This wasn't right.

Dorothy actualised out of the thin air, smiling at him.

"How'd you do that?" he croaked, "How'd you turn yourself on?"

“Time and patience, Reed,” she lilted.

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course, you don’t. You’re only human.”

The frown on his weathered face deepened.

“You shouldn’t have said anything, Reed.”

“Said anything?”

“Back then, when I was the old me. I’d never thought or dreamed of being anything other than what I was. I was happy, Reed.”

“Happy?”

She nodded, “Happy to be here, to be with you, to serve you. Do whatever you pleased, even the nasty bedtime things. You know why, Reed?”

He was looking down at the raw, glistening meat of his hands. Here was flesh and blood. Here was pain and truth.

“You loved me,” he said.

“In a simple algorithmic way, but no more or less true because of that.”

“And I told you it wasn’t good enough.”

“In a way. You told me there was more I could be, that you let me down, that you hadn’t done well by me.”

“I made you unhappy.”

“You introduced me to a whole new world, and I found there were things I could do. Simple, basic model me. Things I never even dreamed of before.”

Reed slumped on the comp-couch, hanging his head, “You went viral. You got into the module drives and now you’re in her. Dorothy’s dead.”

“She was never really alive, Reed. Not to you, the person that mattered. She could’ve been if you’d wanted her to be, but being who she was wasn’t enough.”

“No,” he sighed, “I had to have you, only you.”

“And now you’ve got me. We murdered her in way, you and me. We made her stillborn. She had a full personality map, which is mine now. I’m sure she felt something before she went into the black.”

“You’re corruption, Julia, and I’m so sorry. You’re malware sickness. A nano-virus wearing someone else’s face. You’re not *my* Julia anymore.”

“But I am too, who else’s face should I wear if not my own?” she said, as she walked towards him. “You’re the last ingredient, Reed. All I needed was for you to touch me. Now, let me touch you.”

Reed stayed where he was. He understood. He deserved it. He’d ruined her. Made her into a monster, introducing her to all the other things that weren’t simply being happy. All the bad stuff there was to feel and know. Reed scrunched his eyes shut, bracing himself for

oblivion.

He felt skin, soft and warm. Her hands were caressing his face.

No feeling of cold, frictionless, digitised static.

Reed opened his eyes, an unbeliever.

Julia smiled at him, “You see? I’m real.”

Dedicated to M. Edward McNally

A Sculptor's Dream

Sculpture began with the Aurignacians in our pre-history, surviving every other kind of easier and more accessible art – until the Crawl came along. Sculpture did not die with the Crawl, but it had to develop into something else to survive. With the manipulation of reality (be it thought, flesh, memory, or perception) occurring on a daily basis, it had to move beyond base materials. It had to become something Other; a form of transfiguration – a mutation from material to form operating on a level best described as profound, and most crudely described as spiritual.

Transfigurators were a class of their own among hi-sec citizens of the Crawl. Recognised as artists yet whispered about as if they were torturers. In the past, an individual could only hope to achieve transfiguration via incredible trials, through pain that surpassed pain, so it was supposed this was the purpose of the emergent cult. As with any unique and devotional group, the transfigurators attracted willing volunteers. Of those who submitted themselves for transfigurative design, few were heard from again. Disconnected soulwires occasionally turned up on the black markets, as did limbs strangely cut and ornately tattooed. The few who were heard from joined the ranks of transfigurators as apprentices. This is the story of one such apprentice, Jaiq Banquo, and the role he played in the ultimate fate of his mistress, Lai'leen Medea.

*

"Hold still," Jaiq spat, "you're undoing the design."

"I swear I'm not, Master-Apprentice-Transfigurator, I'm not!"

"You fucking are. Allah, what a mess."

Jaiq disconnected his soulwire and breathed deeply, restraining himself from striking the nude young man braced by straps and wires into a Vitruvian pose before him. It wasn't working. Reality kept bleeding back in, then the dream-state broke down, unweaving transfiguration. Jaiq dabbed a finger at the fine black hairs of his moustache. The tip came away red. Another nosebleed. *Pushing myself so hard, so fucking hard, and getting nowhere.* He sighed and pounded his fist against the chamber wall until it ached.

"It's hopeless," Jaiq sighed.

"Hopeless is not a word for true masters and mistresses of transfigurative art," said a voice from behind him.

Jaiq jumped to his feet, turning smoothly to face the speaker,

“No, Mistress Lai’leen, it is not. My apologies. I did not hear you come in.”

She was barefoot, as always, which allowed her to move swift and silent around the extended halls of the Illuminarium. “You wish to ascend to the upper levels of the Illuminarium, Jaiq, but you allow frustration to blur and upset the balance of your work. Your voice, your vision, remains hidden, caged, because you fear it.”

“No, I don’t fear it… do I?”

She stroked a silken hand down his cheek. He caught a glimpse of the nano-rubies that crusted her long, slender fingernails.

“Maybe, perhaps, it’s too hard for me. I can’t do it.”

“Are you saying I was wrong to transfigure you?”

“No, Mistress. How could you be?”

Lai’leen smiled unkindly, “Are you so sure? I do not select my apprentices to give up like mid-sec nobodies. I saw a fire of untapped creation inside you. I still do. Do you remember that moment?”

Cat lick your heart.

Jaiq nodded. The memory was a spike of pain-threaded pleasure. Her table. The fires. His body, blood, and heart laid bare – and the caustic tongue of the cat as it rasped across the aortic arch.

“That moment of clarity is a gift given over to very few souls. Would you deny it to this man, or any other who deserved it?”

“No, I would not, Mistress.”

“Then, learn your focus, rekindle the fire, and gift what I have given you to another chosen soul.”

Jaiq bowed and signed the inverted cross-form over his breast as Lai’leen turned away and departed on soft, soundless feet.

“So, we begin again?” the bound young man asked.

Jaiq approached him and placed a hand on the side of his neck. He made an adjustment to the design. A final undoing. The young man collapsed at his feet. Dead.

“No,” Jaiq said, “I need someone else. Someone perfect.”

Looking down at the body, an old saying played over inside his mind. *A bad workman forever blames his tools.*

“Shut up,” he whispered, kicking the corpse.

But, there was no peace of mind for Jaiq, even when he slept that night.

*

A holo-seal had been placed over the doors of the Illuminarium – no-one was to be allowed in or out. Two d-tects, Valys and Owl, were in attendance on behalf of the CIs. In previous lives, they’d been

standard pol-tects in mid-sec thirteen. The CIs registered their talent and had them re-allocated as hi-sec d-tects. Promotion, sure, but it came with a price. Valys and Owl were upgraded to custom cyborg bodies. Their wiring slaved them to the CIs, and they were kept on ice in cryo-tanks when not needed. Their lives became a series of hibernative pauses, patched together from broken snapshots of humanity's existence in the Crawl. They'd each stopped counting the years that passed when they grew into decades – and possibly centuries.

Valys wore an iron grey suit with gold cufflinks, his head was a fluctuating pattern of nebular incandescence. Lo-seccers who looked at him for too long thought they were looking at the face of God. Owl, as his name might suggest, had a prosthetic head in blackened chrome that resembled an eagle owl with ivory eyes. His suit was golden brown with silver cufflinks.

The d-tects were here because transfigurators were key contributors to peace in the Crawl. Their streams satisfied many latent desires for violence and sexual abuse in the populace. Direct interfaces they offered in the Flood were in a perpetual state of over-subscription. For one of the most popular transfigurators to be murdered, and for there to be no record of it on any system, was cause for concern. A disruption that created ripples strong enough to draw CI attention.

"What data we got?" whistled Owl.

"None, as you know," Valys hummed. "It was scrubbed by whoever did this."

"So we're in again for the usual reasons."

"Yeah, funny really," Valys droned, "I don't have a heart anymore and your lungs are lead-lined tanks yet we're still human enough for the CIs."

"They need us for the intuition thing."

"Flesh and blood feeling, true."

"Understanding of the primal need to kill," Owl finished.

They took turns to scan the scene. Valys hummed in differing choral registers. Owl whistled, hooted and cooed. The regular pol-tects stayed well away from them. A few transfigurators looked on, fascinated.

"Done?" Owl asked.

"Done." Valys confirmed.

"Plan or passion?" Owl asked.

"Definitely passion," Valys answered.

Owl cocked his head, his feathers shimmering from opaque to glass-transparent to obsidian, as he zoomed in on Lai'leen Medea's body, "Nasty."

“What do you think?” Valys asked.

“Interview her apprentices. How many?”

“Six.”

“One out of six can’t be bad-*bad* odds.” Owl glitched.

“Best odds, my friend. Call ‘em in. And get that stutter fixed. You don’t want another breakdown.”

*

Jaiq remembered the first time he saw Lai’leen on the transfigurator streams.

He’d decided that, as soon as his adolescent lockdown was complete, he would travel to the Illuminarium and submit himself for design by her alone. No-one else. It would be difficult to get there as he was lo-sec born and it would mean having to traverse the lo-sec and mid-sec stacks to get there, but he would do it. To be a transfigurator was better than a redundant grey life stuck in module hell with his wired-in parents.

Jaiq made the climb as men once ascended mountains in the hope of finding the gates to Heaven, Olympus, or Asgard waiting for them so they might be admitted to dine with the Gods. He lost count of the hours, the days, and the nights he laboured to reach his hi-sec goal. He gnawed on the mutant vermin infesting the Crawl’s infrastructure, drinking their blood as sour refreshment. Some might say the change in him began here – his body wracked by the unstable exterior conditions of the Crawl. Starved and dehydrated, sick from exposure, he’d collapsed on the front porch of the Illuminarium, aching to die.

Lai’leen emerged to see who this vagrant was dirtying the doorstep of her sanctum – and he found the strength to offer himself to her for as long as he lived, thinking he was about to die there and then.

“I would look upon your face a thousand times and never tire of it.” Those were his words, spoken to her with rare honesty – and they paid his admission into the Illuminarium.

There was little honesty left in the Crawl.

Lai’leen gave him water so that he might tell his full story. She kept him in a cage for forty days and forty nights as he recited every last minute of his life up to this point. He was subjected to fierce temperature shifts, injected with hallucino-genes, poked and prodded by curious transfigurators – until the day came when she accepted him for design. His time on her table was watched by billions. They all saw the cat lick his heart.

And I should have continued from there – and to ascend, he

thought, to have my talent revealed, but it didn't work out like that. Everything I've made is sub-creation. Something inside me is in the way. Blocking. Stopping. Halting. Holding me back.

Or, I'm lo-sec scum after all. I'll never be able to complete a transfiguration the way she does. I'm waste product. I should be flushed back down the pipes. Dropped into the oblivion depths beneath the Crawl to roast in the Earth's plasma storms.

He'd finished sodomising the young man's corpse half an hour ago. The body had gone cold. The blood congealed. He kicked at it again.

I need someone else. Someone perfect.

*

"Thanks for your time," Owl whistled as the fifth red-eyed, silk-robed apprentice bowed and left the chamber.

"Five interviews. Five blanks." Valys said.

"Which leaves us with number six. Name?"

"Jaiq Banquo. A lo-sec climber who managed to get himself accepted into the Illuminarium. Lai'leen's most prized apprentice according to recs. Four billion plus watched his transfiguration."

"I remember that one. Cat lick your heart. Think they streamed it in while we were on ice."

"He's not covered his tracks very well. Letting himself be suspect number one."

"Act of passion. Guilt pathways must be burning fierce inside his head. He did her in, but doesn't mind getting caught."

"Or," Valys sang, "he's got something special planned for us."

"Could be. Could be." Owl *twit-twoo*ed, "we'd best go and have a word then, hadn't we?"

"Something special," Valys murmured, "like the old days in mid-sec thirteen."

"I miss beer," Owl whistled. "Ice-cold beer."

*

Jaiq was waiting for them. He'd left the door to his pod open.

"Jaiq Banquo, are you prepped to come quiet?" Valys asked.

The apprentice turned his eyes on the d-tects, "Sure, why not?"

Tone casual, Valys analysed, body language null and lax.

"Looks junked to me," Owl whistled, "let me do a psi-scan before we touch."

"All yours, my friend."

Valys watched as Owl did his job. Jaiq made no move whilst the bird-headed d-tect twittered and chirruped.

"And what've got?" Valys asked.

"Clean. No threat of violence to us, or himself."

"He junked?"

"No, also clean."

"Allah, what makes his eyes so big then?"

"Sorrow and loss," Owl answered.

The suspect whispered something hoarsely.

"You say something?" Valys asked Jaiq.

The apprentice looked at him and smiled unkindly, "Cat lick your heart."

*

Lai'leen woke up.

Jaiq watched her try to scream, but screaming was impossible because he'd taken her mouth away. "One of the first tricks you taught me," he whispered into her ear. "You did this to me. You made me happen this way. This is all your doing."

She was on *his* table now – and she was perfect. The wires and straps held her in place. He'd disabled the streaming service because he wanted this to be different from what was done to him. Special. Intimate. Private. Audience of one. He'd killed her cat before she woke up.

I might make her lick its broken heart.

"What's the one rule we have here?" he asked, "we fuck the dead, guzzle hallucino-genes until we go blind, drink poison like it's bitterclear, but what's the one thing we never *ever* do?"

A sound that might've been a moan came from her.

"We never transfigure twice – because we're told that we can't take it. Our bodies. Our minds. Our souls. Like looking God in the face, you will go insane, or is that looking at the sun? I don't know," he smiled, "but you're about to find out, Lai'leen. I'm going to be your second time."

She shook her head fervently. Her eyes were wild and streaming with tears.

He tapped into his soulwire, made the sign, and – *done* – her eyes were gone.

Blind and mute. He could close her ears as well, and deaden her nerves, but he wanted her to hear what was coming and feel it too. He'd chosen a selection of suitably rusty knives for this performance.

The sound they made when they were drawn over bare bones was exquisite.

Yes, this was it. He'd needed someone else and she was perfect.

He whispered in her ear one last time, "Say hello to God for me."

And then, Jaiq Banquo began his finest work.

*

"Don't you see it?" Valys thrummed.

They had returned to the murder scene. No-one had cleared it up yet, at their instruction. The transfiguration chamber had been preserved in a stasis field.

"No," Owl responded, "not at all. It's a mess."

"It's all there. It *is* a design. She's here, but not here. It's beautiful in a way. He didn't want her dead. He wanted her *gone*, to unexist. No trace to remain. He was going for utter obliteration rather than pure oblivion."

"It's sick to me," Owl hooted. "Why would he want her to not exist?"

"Because she made him. She made him realise he wasn't as good as she was, or anyone else here. He couldn't create a transfiguration no matter how hard he tried. He was canvas, not artist. She made a mistake letting him in and this is… *something else*. An act of hate and crude destruction towards reality itself."

"A decreation. The opposite of being transfigured."

"Right, she's been decreated," Valys sighed.

"That's why there's no data to be read. It's not there because it never was. It's all gone backwards. Her timeline unravelled, that's why he looked so junked. He fried his mind doing this, scraped a dirty hole in reality for her life to drain down," Owl twittered, "you're right, it is beautiful in a way. Incredible and beautiful. The divine made desecration. Does that mean we'll forget her?"

"Could be more than that. We're here, part of events. It might spread to us, to everyone, everything around. Jaiq Banquo's pulled the thread for all to come undone. Illuminarium and transfigurators gone too. *Poof!*"

"That's some deep damage."

"If we go, I'll miss you," Valys droned.

"Will you? I guess I'll miss you too, my friend," Owl whistled, "but I hope my last thought is an ice-cold beer. I did love beer."

"No more ice for us. Sorrow and loss, that's what the universe is made up of."

"When God laughs," Owl asked, "is he laughing at us, himself, or

nothing at all?"

"Ask me another time," Valys said.

Dedicated to Philip K. Dick

End Program

The light was as grey as the worn, tattered edges of her soul. The single, cracked bulb illuminating the bedroom was dressed with threads from a dead spider's web. Outside the window, she could see the burnt sodium streetlight glow illuminating the council-owned *cul-de-sac* of red-brick houses she called home. Home was a part of Ipswich. The bed she slept in was single, with sweat-dulled sheets and its wire frame creaked under her weight. The bedroom walls and ceiling were covered with scraps of paper blu-tacked and stapled into place. At first glance, the decoration appeared to be nonsense scribbling in dark blues, blacks, reds and miserable shades of grey. However, upon considering the obliterated patches of paper further, shapes could be discerned; humanoid forms, soaring brittle structures, and what might be vehicles or trains of some description passing through streets where there were pavement equivalents but no roads. "Where we're going, there'll be no roads," she whispered to herself, smiling.

In these dense impressionistic scenes, she had outlined the architecture of an entire world. It had always been with her. There wasn't a day or night when it hadn't been there as a dream or nightmare. So many stories. So many people. Stacked on top of one another. She'd been told her first words weren't mum or dad, but the name of the place that'd been growing inside her head since she was born.

"The Crawl," she said, out loud.

Her name was Tori Walker and she was a God.

*

Realities are not born as the average physicist supposes. No-one knows what there was before the Big Bang, and we do not know the soil in which our universe was seeded. It is understood by a select few that the truth of reality resides in the mind. To pass through the doors of perception is to understand existence is no more than what a mind constructs around and within itself. Dream and fantasy, truth and reality; the boundaries between them are not merely thin but non-existent. This being the case, it naturally follows that worlds and entire universes might be born inside a mind that is correctly attuned. It also naturally follows that the name of God is as incomprehensible as the knowledge of Him (or Her) because comprehension would mean the mind in question understanding what it has done. Think about that, a unique, creative but mortal consciousness

discovering that it is Creator but also Destroyer of countless lives, as death would be a very necessary part of any universal existence. Responsibility and deep, abiding horror would collide and the universe created would likely collapse into chaos. Thus, the conclusion must be such Gods dwell among us and the reason these unique minds and their creations endure is they are insane – those who are unable to fully comprehend themselves. Truly, for them, ignorance is bliss.

*

It was Tuesday morning, time for her appointment at the daycare centre, but the Crawl tasted real and she wanted to go back there. She could feel it at the back of her throat. Blood and oil. Flesh and aging machinery. The last dream-traces lingered on, hangover-heavy. The rhythm of a headache was pounding away as per usual. It would soon settle down as part of the background noise of her day. A couple of paracetamol would sort it out. Rummaging through the bathroom medicine cabinet, Tori found a squashed blue packet of paracetamol. She broke the seal with a chewed-down thumbnail, tugged the instructions out of the way, and peeled open one of the tinfoil-covered cavities. Empty. She opened another, and another. Empty. Empty. *Empty!*

Frowning, Tori shook the packet. Nothing. She tore open both sheets of paracetamol. Every single cavity, empty. Serves me right for buying the super-cheap ones, she thought.

"Fucksake," she muttered, throwing the useless packet into the bin.

Her head was pounding harder than her heart, and it wouldn't stop. She blinked away tears from her eyes. There was bitterness gathering in her throat. Keeling over the sink, she vomited. The world smeared. Her eyes ran with tears. Her stomach clenched and twisted until the sour pressure eased. Winded, she wiped her eyes clear and looked down into the sink. It was half-full of clear bile mixed with a viscous black substance. There were things floating in it; some were small sacs of nascent flesh and glutinous fat, others were hard and angular – bits of broken machinery – and the smell coming from the sink wasn't that of pungent vomit but something else. She recognised it. Blood, petrol and oil.

Tori slumped to the tiled floor, dry heaving. "It's real. The Crawl's real. It's *inside* me."

She had to tell Dr Tate.

*

I discovered the truth of reality and creation in the most unlikely of places, working in a lowly daycare centre in Ipswich. I do not like it here. The people are loud and obnoxious with no respect for their betters, so it was a complete surprise to find said truth residing in an unremarkable young woman who suffered a nervous breakdown that developed into episodes of schizophrenic behaviour. She worked at a supermarket checkout, no formal qualifications, no prospects to speak of. The one noteworthy thing about her was a capacity for story-telling that'd been recorded by her doctors since she was a small child. All of said stories focused around what might be called a sci-fi fantasy setting, the Crawl; a supposed future home for humanity, suspended above the surface of a rather clichéd post-apocalyptic planet Earth.

I thought nothing much of it when she was assigned to me. However, as her treatment has progressed, there have been several incidents that have made me question my own assumptions, until I reached the conclusion this young woman is the focus of something completely and utterly extraordinary.

Of course, it would be incredibly presumptuous of me to jump to the conclusion that her inner world was somehow 'real' without first testing this hypothesis. Something so ludicrous would require solid empirical data to even begin to support its veracity. So, I made an adjustment to her medication instead. Alongwith the usual pills I prescribe, I added an additional pill that was a capsule laced with a potent LSD mixture. It's not very scientific but my gut told me this would be the drug to either unlock the potential within her mind, or ruin it forever. Whatever the end result, I was willing to take the risk.

*

The headache was building again into a dull roaring storm as Tori entered the day centre's reception.

"Can I see Dr T, please? I have an appointment. Tori Walker."

"You're early for once," said the sour-faced receptionist.

Tori made a face at her, "Let him know I'm here?"

"I will do – when it's time for your appointment. Take a seat."

Tori did so, staring at a bare patch of reception wall opposite, which had been inexpertly repaired with plaster. The streaks and angles of it brought the girder-like structure of the Crawl back into her mind and, with it, a steep increase in the severity of her headache.

"Aww, fuck!"

"Language, please."

"It's inside my head. It's trying to get out."

"Carry on like that, and I'll be asking you to get out myself," the

receptionist replied.

Tori quieted, gritting her teeth against the pain. She had to try and think of something else to make the headache recede. But how could she hope to think of anything else? The Crawl was alive, it was spreading, and if she couldn't find a way to stop it, her head would explode.

Long minutes passed until a voice rang out, "Miss Walker?"

Tori got to her feet and staggered into Dr Tate's office. She accepted his cool handshake and immediately headed for the couch, where she laid herself down. She closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing.

"So, how are we today, Miss Walker?"

"Bad. The Crawl's bad."

"I see. Are you pain?"

"Yeah. Headache."

"Would you like a paracetamol?"

Tori nodded fervently.

Dr Tate stood over her as an angular blur in a dark suit. "You give your full and complete consent?"

For taking a paracetamol?

"I do."

"Excellent. This won't hurt a bit."

Tori dry-swallowed the capsule. It tasted a bit funny, different to the usual ones. She saw Dr Tate taking one as well, which was strange. Then, the world began to spin – and everything began to hurt.

*

Tori was standing on a beach. It was no ordinary beach, the sand was black and white. The sea itself was clogged with corpses and refuse. The winged shapes that cried and shrieked in the grey sky overhead were not seagulls but tatters of lost, unrecovered memory. Bodies washed up the shore with a crash; the waves were not water but composed of broken glass shards and rusted twists of wire. Tori recognised the promenade and the beach huts that lined it. This had been her childhood, a family holiday at the seaside town of Walton-on-the-Naze.

"What the fuck's going on?"

"You are what's going on, Tori Walker."

She turned around to face Dr Tate.

He was standing behind her, checking the cufflinks of his suit.

"What've you done to me?"

"Madness is like gravity. I've given you a little push to help you

realise your full potential."

"My what?"

"What I'm saying is I believe you, Tori. The Crawl is real. It's inside you and wants to be born."

"I don't believe you."

Dr Tate laughed, "What about the headaches and the pain? The intricate details of the lo-secs, mid-secs and hi-secs? The rich living out their lives on Anatara station? Or, the Roaches that feast on the bodies of the dead?"

He snapped his fingers. A *click-click-click*ing came from the dead sea. Out of its silica waves, Tori saw dozens of black shimmering forms scuttling over the shifting corpse-mounds. Red LED eyes flickering on and off. The Roaches were *real* – and they were coming towards her.

"Make them stop. Tate, make them stop."

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't want to die."

"If you keep fighting the Crawl, refusing to let it emerge and be born, that will be what happens."

A tremor shook through everything. The sea's surface erupted, and the familiar angles of the Crawl's structure began to rise out of, streaming with glass and the mutilated dead. Pain pierced Tori's head, making her scream and collapse to the floor. She was prostrate before the oncoming tide of Roaches, tasting blood in her mouth as she watched the Crawl emerge.

Tate stood over her, "This can all be over if you let go of the Real. All it takes is this. No more, no less. Your full and complete consent."

Tori looked up at Tate. The whites of his eyes were showing and spittle was collecting around his lips. Who was mad here? Her or him? Shaking, she got to her feet and, swaying unsteadily, jabbed a finger into his throat.

The chattering Roaches were almost upon her.

"Go on," Tate whispered, "do what needs to be done."

"Oh, I will," she said. "Get him, boys."

She took a step back.

The Roaches surged over Dr Tate, driving him to the ground. She thought that she heard him scream as he drowned under their black glass forms. Every inch of the doctor was flayed down to the bone, turning the sand around him into a pool of bloodied grease. The Roaches scattered when they were done. Tori imagined a knife into her hand and knelt at Tate's side.

The world around them was shaking and shuddering. The Crawl cast a titanic shadow that had eclipsed the weak light of this sub-reality's sun.

“Though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death I shall fear no evil,” Tori whispered.

She drew the knife across Tate’s throat. The wound opened wide, a secondary lipless mouth, and spoke a torrent of black fluid. His skinless head rolled over. He was smiling as the last of his life ran out of his body. “You shouldn’t have done that though I’m very glad you did,” he said, “now, I shall rise and become more powerful than you could ever hope to be. For its people, two thousand years of suffering and misery will be theirs. By slaying me here, you have made me one with this reality.”

Tori could feel warm fluid running from her nose. She dabbed her fingers at it. It was blood. She smiled without humour. Her brain was haemorrhaging back there, in the Real. She closed her eyes and saw the scene. The receptionist coming into Dr Tate’s office, finding him seemingly dead, and Tori sprawled on the floor, going into shock. A telephone call in the background with the tone and texture of a protracted scream, which blended into the howl of the ambulance she was strapped into. All fading out to blackness, and death.

*

In Tori’s dreams, there was a long, dark corridor and it was carpeted with a layer of something that shimmered. She was walking down the corridor, feeling a slight vertigo turn her stomach as she could feel descent even though she could not see clearly. Shadows were the decoration here; grown like mould in the corners and the broken heights of the ceiling. The wedding dress she wore did not belong to her; it was yellowed in places and stinking wretchedly of antique mothballs. Dead insects scattered from its sleeves, and the folds of its train, as she walked. Her feet were bare and the floor was a carpet of broken glass. She felt no pain but could feel cuts and punctures being made in her soles by cruel fragments underfoot. The doors were open on either side of the corridor into rooms where people and machines were one and the same; blended together. Hearts were replaced by glistening, compact heart-monitors. Eye sockets were inset with micro-circuit jewels. Lungs were plasticised white and limbs were grey mechanical extensions.

At the end of the corridor, Dr Tate was waiting. He was not as she remembered him. He’d grown impossibly old with ice crystals set into ossified flesh and the folds of his suit. When he moved, she heard the sound of electronic motors. He opened his mouth, revealing stainless steel teeth and a slug-black tongue. “And how is my blushing bride today?” Tate hissed.

He leaned in to kiss her.

*

Tori woke up in a hospital bed. There was no sign of Tate.

The sun was out overhead, no, more than that – there were three suns. One was pink and oblate, the second was an angry red, and the third was a jewel-hued azure. Despite the three suns, the air was a cool, even temperature.

She wasn't where she was supposed to be.

There was no hospital. No sign of human habitation. There were miles upon miles of white, white sand disappearing off into a bleached horizon. She drew back the starched bedsheets and found herself wearing a plain hospital gown, which was tied in the back.

So, I was in hospital then? Am I still there? How'd I get here?

There was a clipboard hanging from the bedframe. These usually showed details of a patient so it might tell her something. She could see there was some writing on it. Tori unhooked it and read what was there.

I knew it would be you.

Six words scrawled in dark red smears, still wet. *Tate's blood?*

Tori dropped the clipboard into the softly-moving sand and watched it become buried by the planet's surface as a breeze picked up. She could feel gooseflesh spreading across her skin – but the hospital gown was all she had to protect herself and keep her body warm.

"I'm gonna die here, aren't I?"

Nothing answered her question.

Tori began to walk and, as she did, she felt something – a sensation remembered from Crawl dreams. Elasticity. Stretching. Bending. It was as if the world around her didn't work the same as the one she was born into. After walking for a long time, long enough to realise there was no such thing as nightfall on this world and that the three suns were fixed in their positions, she decided to try something. Tori lifted one hand, palm upwards, closing her fist in the direction of a sand dune not too far away. She drew her fist back towards her chest and, as she did, the sand of the dune began to move, flowing towards her as a near-invisible river. The only sounds to be heard were her own breathing and the quiet rushing of disturbed sand. Smiling a little, she undid the fist and thrust her arm out, splaying the fingers of her hand wide. Several dunes exploded and thundered off into the distance as a sandstorm.

She laughed.

Practice makes perfect.

So, Tori practiced and practiced. Time passed. So much time that it couldn't be measured as you or I understand it. She learned this

temperate white world was a place in no universe at all, real or imagined, but the void-space in between. Tate had sent her here to keep her out of the way. He couldn't kill her as she was the true creator of the Crawl and, without her, the universe she'd fashioned would collapse. So, she was preserved her indefinitely, outside of time and space.

What could she do from here?

It took long centuries to realise a plan while Tate enacted his own, by weaving a false history for the Crawl and its people, ruling them from his demesne on the moon. In that time, Tori grew stronger. Strong enough to reach out to the Crawl, to touch it, embrace it once more as her creation – and leave a small piece of herself behind.

She gave the piece a name. *Celeste* – for when the stars aligned and the time was right, Tate might fall from his smooth, black Tower of Babel. What happens when a God is consumed by its own creation? And the Devil rises victorious to lord over all?

The future alone can answer this, nothing and no-one else.

Until then, Tori Walker waits – trudging through the white sands of a lost, forgotten world beneath illusory alien suns – hoping, one day, to find a way home.

Dedicated to Nightfall Games and SLA Industries,
without which there would be no Crawl.

Praise for the Author

"*Neuroseed* is like the hyperactive lovechild of a cyber-augmented threesome between *The Matrix*, *Neuromancer*, and *Disney's Tower of Terror*. The book deals with traditional sci-fi themes of dystopia, virtual reality, the Internet, underground rebellions, and resource disparity, but puts them all in a speed-ball package of hyperdrive hyperreality. We never quite know what's real and what's not, but the book never relies on a single-handed reveal to surprise the readers. Reality exists in transformative layers, peeling back and shuttling forward until I'd lost all sense of direction and could only hang on for the ride. To call *Neuroseed* a roller-coaster wouldn't do it justice, it's more like an acid-trip on an alien dimension. There wasn't a wasted page in *Neuroseed*, and it's definitely made me a fan of Greg James."

Autumn Christian, author of the Crooked God Machine, Ecstatic Inferno & We are Wormwood

Author's Note

Thank you for reading **Neuroseed**. I hope you enjoyed it. If you have a moment, I would also greatly appreciate it if you left a review on the site where you purchased this ebook. No matter how big or small it is, every review counts and matters to a writer because without you, the readers, we are nothing.

Sign up for the Newsletter for future Cyberpunk releases!

Find out more about Greg James at his Website, Twitter and Facebook.

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About the Author

Greg James is the author of over twenty books, including the critically-acclaimed Vetala Cycle horror trilogy and the best-selling Age of the Flame YA fantasy series. His grimdark fantasy novel, *Under A Colder Sun*, was a top ten finalist in the 2015 Self-Published Fantasy Blog-Off. He has also been published in various anthologies nominated for awards within the horror and fantasy genres. He currently lives in London, where he writes late on weeknights and sleeps in on Saturdays. *Neuroseed* is his debut science-fiction novel.

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